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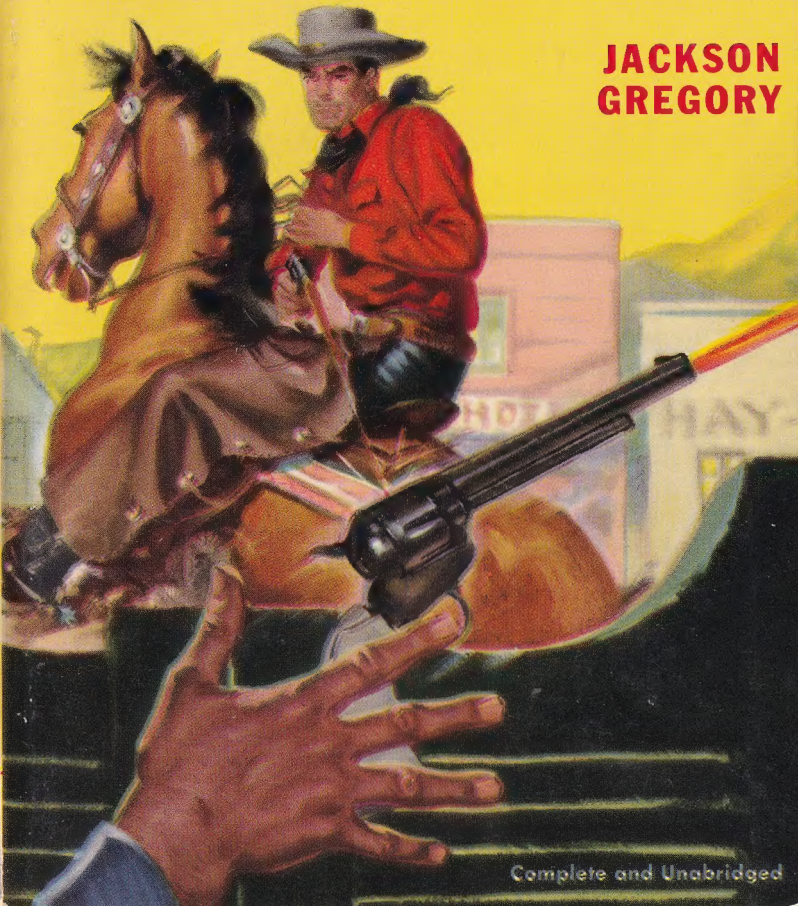
The Man From Texas

JACKSON GREGORY



Complete and Unabridged

A WESTERN NOVEL

The Man From TEXAS

Jackson Gregory

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CHAPTER I

BILL CARSON accounted himself to be in very serious trouble.

At the time he was plain Bill Carson, not having acquired either the name of Pedro Morales or Bill Gaunt. Those came later after he and his drawl had left Texas, and though he came to be identified for a Texan, what with his looks and speech and carriage, he was for a time mistaken for a border half-breed; that was when he went without shaving and used the name Pedro Morales.

He was in the sort of trouble he did not like. There were brands of trouble which appealed to him, when a man could buckle on his guns and step into it, or double his fists and battle through. This time he was pretty much disgusted and without hope.

It happened this way: Bill Carson had a sprawling cattle ranch down in Texas with which he was by way of being in love. It had been his dad's; before that, his granddad's. Two very fine old gents, both gone now and, as it happened, both with their boots on. Young Bill's mother hadn't hung on much longer after Bill's dad died, and for four years now young Bill had lived there alone. And, after he had swallowed his grief as all men have to do, he had lived happily. He was what they called a well-to-do rancher. Not rich by any means, but always with a few dollars at call. A two week's trip once a year to San Francisco where he was welcomed heart-warmingly at the Palace Hotel; a two weeks' trip to New York where he holed up at the old Astor. The rest of the time on the ranch. Altogether, pleasant days. The boys who worked for him were old hands, home folks. Yes, sir, pleasant days.

Then, out of nothing came the trouble. It was like this: Young Bill dolled up for his annual trip east to sample the flesh pots, to spend his surplus funds, to have him a time and come gratefully, even joyously, home. Then, enter the villain.

Only the villain was an old friend and not a villain at all, but a fine fellow, round and chubby and to be trusted with your last dime. But he came over from Los Angeles, and all that he had in his head was Oil. He said, "Bill, there's oil on this ranch of yours. Here you are running a bunch of cows and making nothing a year out of your whole investment, when you ought to have oil pouring in and turning into barrelfuls of gold pieces."

Bill laughed at him. Oil on this ranch? A crazy idea. And he had to pack his bags and get into a buckboard and drive forty miles to the railroad.

"I'll be back inside three-four weeks, kid," he said easily. "Go ahead and find your oil if you can, and I'll buy you a hat."

He signed the papers, scarcely skimming them. Oil on this ranch! He laughed and slapped his friend on the fat shoulder and slung his bags into the buckboard.

But he didn't get back in three-four weeks. He had himself a good time in New York; there were a lot of folks he knew who greeted him warmly, and there were a lot of new folks to meet. He tarried voluntarily a full three weeks. Then he spent three weeks in a hospital. You see, whenever young Bill Carson went to a city he left his guns at home, that seeming to be the proper etiquette. And then one night three very slick young gents whom he sort of figured friendly because he had bought them, along with other friends, unlimited bottles of champagne and the trifles to go along with it, had suggested a very logical end for an evening, a game of poker somewhere downtown. It turned out to be a hold-up, and Bill Carson had fought it out, using his fists, very valuable and trustworthy weapons. But the three slick young gents surprised him by toting flat, ugly looking though small automatics, and had drilled a couple of neat holes in him. They had made their get-away, but they hadn't grabbed his wallet. He had his three weeks in the hospital but did not die. Altogether, he figured complacently that he had come out on top.

But he felt shaky when he was released. So he went down to Atlantic City for another three weeks, stopping at a hotel he knew just off the Board Walk. He rode up and down in a sort of basket cart with a colored boy doing all the work; he found his legs again and walked; he took a swim. But he didn't go to the trouble of sending word back home where he was or why he was tarrying. Then he took a train and headed back west,

back to Texas. And when he got there, as fit as a fiddle again, he almost wished he had stayed away another few weeks—or months —or years.

His ranch was spoiled. It was wrecked, ruined, soiled, made into a dirty mess. For that villain, no villain at all but an old friend, cherubic and beaming, had done exactly what he had sworn he would do—he had struck oil. There were damned oil derricks all over the place. Oil was pouring in more barrels a second than you could shake a stick at; you could smell it five miles away. And Bill Carson, instead of being an easy-going, free-spending, always nearly-broke young cow puncher, was by way of being a millionaire or even worse than that.

Anyhow, his ranch was a mess.

And they had even got his name, his picture, too, into the papers. "Handsome young Texan Makes Millions!" There was a great stack of papers on his table: Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Antonio—New York, and yes even, dammit, Atlantic City! Only he hadn't looked at papers, except for baseball scores. Damn.

Yes, even his picture in the papers! That was the villain-friend's work. "I could choke your liver out!" Bill Carson told him, and the friend grinned and polished off his drink.

"I made you a pile of money, kid," he reminded the irate rancher. And he tucked in the corners of his good-humored mouth smugly. "Me, I made myself enough for a little vacation down in South America."

Bill Carson filled the glasses again and glowered. But the worst was still ahead of him; somehow in his bones he felt it as one feels a thunder storm gathering.

Reporters came to visit him; he put them up over night and filled their bellies and poured much Texan liquid hospitality down their throats, and writhed under their impertinent questionings. Then girls came to marry him! They swarmed in like bees looking for honey. He, being Bill Carson, simply rolled his pack, buckled on his guns, straddled the best horse he had and rode away.

All this, he estimated, was going to take some figuring out. He was like a ship with the rudder torn off; he felt lost; his work

was all gone, all interest gone; nothing to work for; his ranch as good as taken away from him.

Se he forked his horse and rode.

CHAPTER II

BILL CARSON, since arriving at home, hadn't taken time to shave. Now, some days later, he looked liked the villain in an old-fashioned melodrama. No man ever had blacker or more unruly whiskers when he turned them loose.

And he was on foot, with a pack on his back, on a narrow, winding mountain road thick with dust and blisteringly hot with a sun doing its best to torture him. Walking, an unusual pastime, in high-heeled riding boots, with blisters on both heels, he was inclined to see the dark side of things.

"There's murder in my soul," grumbled young Mr. Carson. "I can feel it swelling up like a boil. Oh, for somebody to murder!"

He had ridden in leisurely comfort, feeling almost happy again to get away from the mess his friend Harry Morton had made of his ranch. He knew where he was going, and why. He began to figure that there might still be fun left in a merry world, despite oil that smelled to heaven and made you as hateful of gold as old man Midas ever was. Then his horse, at a swinging gallop in a short cut across an upland meadow, shoved its foot down into a squirrel hole and did a turn-over that shot the careless Mr. Carson over its head and onto his own in the grass. Bill Carson had said his brief "Damn" as any man would, then had picked himself up and had gone back to his cow pony.

Luck was his that his horse hadn't broken a leg. But the horse had come next door to that; it could hardly set front right hoof to ground; the sprain was in the shoulder and was, Bill Carson judged, pretty doggoned bad. You couldn't ride a horse that limped and shuddered like that. So what to do?

He had unsaddled; had hidden saddle and bridle in the willows at the rim of the meadow; had turned his horse loose with a sympathetic slap on the rump and a roughing of the mane—and

had shouldered his bundle and gone on. A few minutes later he made out that he still had his spurs on; he tossed them into a clump of brush at the roadside and plugged stubbornly ahead. He was going where he was going, and no squirrel hole was going to stop him.

But his feet hurt. And the sweat ran down into his eyes. And never in all his born days had he carried a bundle on his back like a bindlestiff. These were the reasons why he felt in murderous mood. He had a long way to go and didn't care much for this type of going.

But essentially Bill Carson was a man of merry heart. He chuckled to himself a time or two; hot and sore-footed as he was, tired and dusty and with his whiskers itching, he could see the funny side of the whole thing. So he chuckled to himself a time or two and once, starting out swearing again, sat down on his bundle and laughed outright.

He came to a place in midafternoon where there was water at the dusty roadside. There was a spring and a watering trough made of a log scooped out but with its ends left intact; you could water your horse here, if you had a horse, as most civilized white men were supposed to have.

He started to drink, saw his reflection and held still a moment.

"I'll have to shut my eyes," he told himself. "If I drink out of the trough, like I'm going to, putting my face down into cold water, it will be like kissing about as dirty looking a half-breed as I ever saw. In case there have been any murders committed lately around here, they'd have a right to hang me on suspicion. Maybe I'd better throw my guns away and duck into the brush anyhow."

He drank, cooled himself, squatted on his bed roll and had a cigarette, cocked his eye at the sun, heaved a tremendous sigh, picked up his roll, shouldered it with a grunt and plodded along.

It was all uphill here and he didn't care for it. He had a notion to take his boots off and go barefooted. He also was tempted to hurl his canvas roll down into the canyon and thumb his nose after it. And he chuckled again, seeing the funny part of it. In his money belt, under his shirt, he was carrying fifty thousand dollars in thousand dollar bills.

A man ought always to bring along a spare horse. A man like Bill Carson, going places, should have taken his car, high-powered

and swift and dependable, and have forgotten that there were such things as horses at all. But then he had wanted to dig out on horseback, and he had done it, and all he'd like to do right now was get his hands on that cussed little ground squirrel that had dug its hole just in the wrong place. With the whole wide world to dig in, why right there where his horse was putting its foot down?

"I knew a fat man once," he reminisced, "who said walking was great; fine exercise; it trimmed his belly down. I'd like to have him and that damn squirrel together right now."

And he plodded on, and the sun lowered, but still it was hot and the road seemed bound to climb endlessly. And then, far behind him through the sun-shot silence he heard the toot of an auto horn.

Promptly he threw down his bundle at the side of the road, sat on it, pulled off his hat, rolled a cigarette and waited. Someone in a car, going his way. Life grew brighter.

He saw the dust cloud before he saw the car; someone in a hurry, you'd say. He heaved himself up and stood out in the road, waving his hat. The car zoomed around a bend. A long, streamlined cream-colored gleam it was, and it kept on zooming and all but ran him down. The horn blasted at him as he stood in the road and he was pretty sure that if he hadn't jumped aside there would have been a messy end to Bill Carson. He got only a glimpse of the driver: A woman. Then he was alone with the dust cloud, his bundle and his throbbing feet.

He was more tempted than ever to throw his roll down into the canyon. But it seemed to be in the cards that he'd sleep out under the mountain pines tonight, and summer or no summer, it would be pretty nippy weather before morning. And he did have a frying pan and some bacon and coffee—

He made one quiet yet emphatic remark. He said,

"Anybody that's got a car, and leaves a poor devil like me on a road like this, on foot and with both boots so full of feet that it's going to be a job to get the boots off, ought to be strangled. If ever I could catch up with that woman there would be murder with all the trimmings."

How long could a road, going up hill, keep on going up hill? The blamed thing would be up at the moon next thing you knew. Up and up and up, winding and twisting and ankle deep in dust.

He estimated roughly that he had walked as far today as he had walked during all the twenty-six years of his life. He estimated, altogether exaggeratingly, that he had walked five miles before he came up with a stalled car. A long, ugly, streamlined yellow car. And a woman was hovering over it. Hovering, and doing little else, at her wits' ends.

Bill Carson came abreast of the car and could not, for the life of him, keep from pausing a moment, could not help letting his grin widen so that it was like a white-toothed gash across a tanned, bewhiskered face. He felt that his day had made amends; he was happy now.

The woman looked at him fiercely. She had a wrench in her gloved hand; there was a smudge of oil on her face; she was more girl than woman, come to look at her, and as pretty as a peach. But right now she was not at her best, not by any means. Somehow she made him think of a hornet. Hornets are shapely and graceful, but they do lose their tempers. This girl, he thought, was ready to chew ten-penny nails.

He didn't say a word; he just stood there and grinned. He looked at her silly little shoes. She'd find out for herself how much fun it was walking up Black Mountain grade in high heels. He started to tip his hat and wish her a pleasant stroll.

She looked him over carefully, up and down. Then she spoke. And, knowing her southwest Indians and half-breeds, she addressed him in Spanish. In a Spanish which halted and tripped on her tongue, she said,

"Señor, yo estoy in—*en—estoy en—en* trouble. Darn it! *No se que hacer con esto—con esta* darned *machina."* She waved her hand. *"Esta* car *no quiere* go ahead. *Puede. Usted comprender? No puedo hablar muy bueno—muy bien—Espagnol.* But just the same my car has stopped and I can't make the darned thing go!"

The grin faded from his face, but, oh, if only she could have seen the grin in his heart! Happy? He could have flung his hat over the highest pine tree!

He spoke to her in English. He spaced his words nicely; he would appear to stop and think of the right word. He said,

"But, Señorita, me I spick the Eengleesh so nice and good! I go one time to school een Arizona; seex mont' I go one time. I talk good, more better as you talk Espagnol. I take off my hat to you, Señorita."

He took off his hat and made her a Mexican bow and twisted up his incipient mustache.

"My car!" she exclaimed. "Something has gone wrong with it. It's let me down. I can't get it started again. And I've got to get it going. Can you help me?"

He eased his bundle down into the road. He made himself a cigarette. He leaned lazily against the car. He was most deliberate in every gesture. Strangle the woman? Not necessary.

He sat down on his bundle.

"Eet's so bad," he said mournfully. "Nice, pretty girl like you, walk in nice little new shoes een the r-road." He rolled his r's and his eyes at her and sighed deeply. He asked softly, in a southern tone of voice, sounding in deepest sympathy, "You goin' to walk ver', ver' manny miles?"

He watched contentedly as she bit her lip. She took a deep breath, checked her impulses, and answered him fairly steadily:

"I have about ten or twelve miles to go. I can't walk that far; I'd be hours! Do you know anything about a car at all? I'll pay you if you can fix it."

He lifted his brows at her.

"You pay?" He managed to look as villainous as Boris Karloff ever did at his best and worst moments. "You got money weeth you, Señorita?"

He frightened her. She hastened to say,

"Oh, not with me. But when I get to the ranch. I have money there and I will pay you gladly if you can help me."

"Aha! Ahaha!" He shrugged elaborately and looked at the car. He shrugged again.

"One time," he said, "I have car-r-r, too. Good one. Ford, Mothel T. She run like one rabbeet, run good, only stop sometime. I feex, she run some more. One day I drive her t'irty mile eeen one hour! Eet's good, no?"

"It's wonderful! But can you help me?"

He looked her car over again; the hood was up; he wondered what had gone wrong with the thing. Out of gas, probably; that was to be thought of with a girl like this at the wheel. Carburetor flooded? Likely. Some very minor thing without a doubt. He knew the car well; it wouldn't let you down, as she claimed, unless you let it down first.

"Seguro. Sure for sure. Me, I can feex. You can go like the weend, Señorita! Me, I am ver' good to feex the car-r-rs."

Still he did not budge. She didn't quite stamp her foot but he knew that she wanted to. Presently she said, sounding restrainedly patient,

"Will you see what you can do, Señor?"

"Bueno. Seguro. Sure for sure." Still he sat there with his cigarette. He shoved his hat far back; he lifted his languid eyes to her stormy ones. He said, "An' you goin' pay me plenty?"

A small cloud of dust puffed up from beneath her foot.

"Yes! I told you that I would. But hurry."

"Where you go, Señorita? What rancho?"

"El Capitan," she said.

"Maybe ten, fifteen mile? *Bueno.* We go eef I feex heem. An' you pay. An' you tell me, you live on El Capitan Rancho?"

"Yes. It's my home now. My father and— We live there."

"Bueno. I go for feex your car." He inhaled deeply and at length; he appeared to meditate, though well enough he knew what he was going to do to her instead of strangling her as he how vowed to do. He grew so deliberate that almost he had her dancing in hot impatience. He said drawlingly, "Firs' theeng, you say you weel pay me *un peso* for to feex the car-r-r. One more theeng, you take me to ride weeth you; my feets is hurtin' me. *Caramba,* they hurts. One more theeng, when we come home to your nice rancho, you geeve me the job, no?"

"Job? At the ranch? What do you mean?"

"Me," said Bill Carson, "am good man for work. You ver' nice señorita. *Bueno.* So I work for you. *Quarente pesos*—w'at you say, forty dollars for the mont'. *Bueno?"*

She could have killed him. He knew that, and his contentment swelled. This was far better than merely strangling the girl.

"All right," she said. Another puff of dust boiled up from under her foot. "Yes. I'll give you a dollar to get this darned car going again, and I'll let you ride with me, and I'll give you a job at the ranch for forty dollars a month. Now you're working for me. Suppose we get started."

He sighed.

"Eet's *mucho* hot," he complained. "I have one other leetle smoke, no? We wait until the sun she go down?"

"No! Now! Oh, hurry!"

He sighed again and got lazily to his feet. He went to the car, wondering again what could ail the thing. He checked the gas to begin with; almost a full tank. He examined all four tires as though suspecting them of having to do with affairs, while an irritated girl looked on. He bethought himself to say with a broad smile, nicely lifting his hat.

"My name, Señorita, Pedro Morales. Jus' Pete weeth frien's like you. An' you?"

"I am Miss Edwards," she told him briefly. "And now that the proper conventions are nicely taken care of, what is wrong with my car? Have you the vaguest idea?"

"But your other name, Señorita? Eef we are going to be, like I tol' you, frien's? Your firs' name?"

She was at the man's mercy and knew it. She judged him about the dirtiest looking specimen of humanity she had ever seen—not taking into consideration that some of the road dust he had accumulated was of her own making. To speed things up she answered,

"I'm Miss Tess Edwards of El Capitan Rancho. Is that enough, Señor Pedro Morales? Now, my car—"

He kept on wondering what was the matter with the thing. As she had done before him, he peered under the hood. He saw in an instant, through sheer luck, what she had overlooked: It was just the matter of a wire that had lost its mooring—

He said, "You get in the car and see eef eegneetion she is all right, no?"

While she was obeying orders he swiftly anchored the wire, then closed the hood. All that she saw was the hood being closed. He tossed his bundle to the back seat, came to her side, got in and took the wheel in his hands. She exclaimed hotly,

"You haven't done a thing to fix it!"

He smiled gently upon her.

"Me, I am good for drive a car-r-r," he told her.

She gasped when she heard the engine purring sweetly, when he meshed his gear and the car slid smoothly along up the winding road.

"What on earth!"

His smile, growing broader, remained gentle. He murmured,

"Señorita Tess, you have some black on your so nice leetle nose."

She snatched up her bag, went swift-fingered through it, produced a small mirror and discovered that he was altogether right.

CHAPTER III

YOUNG CARSON, so recently disgusted with fate's general setup, discovered that zest had come back into life. He forgot his oil-stained ranch and his ill-gotten wealth. He was having more fun than any barrelful of monkeys. And, major part of the zest and the fun, he was teasing the life out of the girl he hadn't quite strangled. He didn't know that anyone could hate as she hated him. He reveled in the swift moments. He felt rather like the old Indians who used to delight in thrusting thin slivers of pine or redwood into the flesh of their victims, then setting the slivers on fire, making little torches of them. There's a good old expression of an exasperated person. "You burn me up!" That was what he was doing instead of indulging in the cruder affair of manslaughter. Let him hump along on foot in the dust, would she? On foot! He'd show her.

He was already showing her.

One thing to her credit, she kept her promises. She did give him a ride all the way to El Capitan Rancho—which, by the way, was cheek by jowl to the ranch for which he was headed. She did pay him his silver dollar for "feexing" her car-r-r. And she gave him a job at forty dollars a month. She gave him a job that was handpicked. As Miss Tess Edwards figured things, he would last the small fraction of one day.

Now Bill Carson was a man of a big heart. In his heart was room for many loves. He did love horses. He and horses spoke the same language, they understood one another. This Miss Tess did not know.

She came out to the corral early the next morning looking like an opening rosebud dipped in dew. He felt that he should find dew drops in the curls cascading down to her shoulders. She was very femininely and provocatively clad in a thin little sum-

mery dress. Her eyes were filled with more glory than a field of violets.

She brought him his big round silver dollar.

She said, "Señor, thank you for helping me yesterday with my car." Her eyes changed from flower softness to stiletto stabs. She knew very well that this lazy, dirty, half-bred dog had made a fool of her; she knew very well that he had taken his south-of-the-border revenge because she hadn't stopped to offer him a ride. She said, "And your job, Señor; over in that other corral, the big one. There are seven horses there to be broke to the saddle. I hope that you and the horses will have a nice time."

She could spin on her heel like a top. She was away before he could make the proper retort.

He idled in the morning sun, thinking things over. He pinched out his cigarette and stepped along to the big corral to have a look at the seven horses.

Seven horses? Seven devils! He recognized that fact at the first glance. He climbed up to the top rail of the corral and sat there studying them appraisingly. He hooked his heels on the second rail and still sat, doing some more studying. So that was her game, huh? Kill him off the first day, or just have him roll in the dirt and quit. For her to laugh at—

She wouldn't have any fun, he told himself, unless she saw the goings-on. So, in the house now, she'd be peeking out through the curtains? *Bueno*. Here goes.

He slid down from his perch and went to the barn. He selected a saddle that suited him and a bridle; he buckled on a pair of spurs, took down a rope from its peg and slouched lazily back to the corral. He had already selected his first mount.

The horse he had chosen didn't look to him so much like a horse as like some hammer-headed antediluvian beast never yet properly catalogued. Its neck was too long, for one thing, and its eyes weren't so much like a horse's eyes as like a devil's, and it had plainly showing buck teeth which you'd know would hunger to sink themselves into a man's leg. Or into his neck, as far as that goes. A brute that would revel in pounding you to death with all four hooves, once given a half chance.

In the corral he flipped the wide noose of his rope unerringly. The captured horse set its forefeet and dragged back; it even

bit with its ugly buck teeth at the rope, a new trick as far as Bill Carson knew.

"Your name is Dark Angel," said Bill Carson. "And, come hell and high water, I'm going to ride you."

He had his work cut out for him just getting the brute saddled and bridled. He began to entertain doubts as to the wisdom of having selected Dark Angel for his first mount. Well, he had let himself in for it and so watched his chance, toed into the stirrup and went up into the saddle. And the instant he hit saddle leather Dark Angel began to teach Bill Carson—Bill Carson who knew horses—a few things about the ways a horse could buck.

First, the horse tried to bite his leg off. It missed by an inch, ground its ugly teeth and cut across the yard in a jolting series of stiff-legged jumps. It spun about like a dancing dervish, reared and tried to go over backward, came to earth right side up only because of a smart rap of Carson's loaded quirt between the laid-back ears, and went sun-fishing. Within the first half dozen jumps Bill Carson felt as though his spine were broken and his head about to be snapped apart from his neck.

He had ridden horses at the tender age of three or four years. As years rolled by he had ridden nearly anything that came his way that had four legs, omitting lizards and small fry like that; calves, young bulls, all sorts of horses. And yet he had never straddled such a bolt of lightning as this Dark Angel of the buck teeth and ingrown disposition.

"I guess I picked me the wrong horse," he decided within about ten seconds. "Here's where I bite the dust—and the damn brute will savage me when I'm down!— Like hell!" said Bill Carson and raked Dark Angel with his spurs.

Dark Angel bucked all over the yard, twisting and lurching and snapping with bared teeth. Bill Carson rode the wild devil somehow; he slapped the ugly brute with his hat, he drove the horse mad with his spurs, he used his quirt as further stimulant, and at every buck-jump looked for a place to land. He did some riding that early morning, did Bill Carson. And all of a sudden Dark Angel folded up and quit.

"That was nice while it lasted," said Bill Carson, and patted the horse's lean, sweat-wet shoulder. "I christen you again: Bright Angel, that's your name."

And he struck across the fields at an easy lope, letting the

horse have its way for a spell, talking to it softly, patting its shoulder again, saving the spurs and the quirt. Darned fine pony, that's what Bright Angel was—or could be.

Fifteen minutes later he was back at the corral. His body was sore, but you wouldn't have known it as he slid easily out of the saddle. He led the horse into the barn, unsaddled, replaced the bridle with a tie rope, led Bright Angel into a sunlit stall and went looking for curry-comb and brush. The animal got the first real going over it had ever had; left dry and silkily shining, it tried at the final moment to bite his hand off. Bill Carson got out of the way and laughed.

He went back to the corral and sat on the top rail, his boot heels caught on the rail next below. Shucks, why had he felt so disgusted with everything only just yesterday? He looked the other horses over; he thought, "I bet a man I made little Tess Edwards madder'n a wet hen, not getting bucked off; I bet a man she saw the whole show, but she won't say so. And I bet any two gents, odds two to one, that she can't guess how close I came nineteen times to scooping up dirt with my under jaw!"

He picked out his second horse. He did it cool-headedly, working for Bill Carson now, staking himself to an easy one. Say, *did* he want a rocking chair!

There was a young mare, a red bay, full of spirit, a pretty thing, yet not a devil like the Angel; he'd take her, ride her softly, rest himself before he took a chance with a couple of the others, fine-limbed, high-headed things that had caught his eye and his fancy. His back still was like a toothache, and he felt as though at any moment his head would fall off. If only Bright Angel had kept up the good work for about two more jumps—Well, he might not be sitting at ease on the corral's top rail right now.

He got down and threw out the snaky coil of his rope and brought Dolly to a startled standstill. He named her Dolly on the instant. He led her out into the stable, saddled and bridled her with, as he had presupposed, little resistance. Sure she was wild; sure she would buck; sure, in a rather gentle way she would try to kill him. But, after Bright Angel, Dolly would be his rocking chair.

Then his new boss, Miss Tess Edwards, stood at his elbow. He hadn't heard her, hadn't seen her coming. A second ago it

had been just an ordinary sort of world, and now here she was.

She had changed into riding togs and right away he knew what he had already suspected; she did not belong to the west but to the east. She was tricked out in the sort of outfit—oh, effective, all right; a knockout—that he had seen more than once in Central Park. Not this side of the Rockies though. Pretty as a peach? A whole basketful of peaches would have to surrender the ribbon to her!

She said as from a distance, "So you are going to start riding the horses, Pedro?"

He doffed his sombrero gallantly and gave her that white-toothed smile of his.

"But, Señorita, I am already start. *Seguro.* Sure for sure. I peek out one leetle *caballo* and I ride heem up and down an' put him to eat heem some breakfas'. He ees a nice leetle *caballo;* you weel love. Good for ladies to ride on. W'at you call sweet and gently, that horse; her name, I name heem the Bright Angel. Now I go for try an' ride thees one." His smile broadened. "I theenk you jus' be good to Pedro Morales; you glad I feex the car-r-r; you geeve me the easy job, no?"

He saw her biting her lips. She could have killed him.

She went into the barn and looked at Bright Angel, combed and brushed, with satiny skin agleam. The vicious devil at sight of her tried to kick her brains out, snapped at her with those savage teeth.

"Bright Angel!" she said in the way a wasp would say it could wasps speak. "Black Devil, that's what you are!"

Then there was, just behind her, that hateful half-breed. (But how he could ride! Sh. She'd never let him know that she had seen.)

"Señorita," he said most respectfully, "you go for ride, no? Eet is fine pleasure to me for feex you one horse with saddle on. You like my Bright Angel? Or thees other leetle mare. I call her Dolly? Or some other one?"

She looked thoughtfully, or so it would seem, at Bright Angel. She said, her finger on her chin.

"This one, the one you call Bright Angel, looks nice. I might ride him. But you see, Pedro, I have another horse that I ride every morning." She used a thumb to point. "Down in the last

stall. And the saddle is hanging there, just behind. I think I will ride Baby this morning."

He went down to the last stall and inspected Baby. Baby was that in name only; she must have had babies of her own that had been saddle-broke years ago. She was inclined to be overweight; she was the sort of thing Bill Carson had in mind when he said "rocking chair." He saddled her with a sigh and brought her out.

"Thees Baby, she look pretty wild to me," he said gravely. "You hol' on tight to the saddle horn when she go for buck, Señorita."

She flashed him a glance of scorn—scorn of the purest ray serene—that made him grin secretly; she went up into the saddle and rode away, a young queen turning her pretty back upon a serf.

Bill Carson rolled a cigarette and chuckled in such fashion that he tore the paper and spilled the Durham and had to make himself a new smoke. Then he went back to his horse-breaking job. Forty dollars a month, Mr. Millionaire Bill Gaunt Carson; forty dollars, and found! What a snug berth!

CHAPTER IV

He refrained from shaving. When he looked at himself in a cracked looking glass in the bunkhouse he didn't know himself. His whiskers were blacker than his hair, thick as the hair on a dog's back. He looked like Pedro Morales all right, a half-breed from nowhere, going the same place. He spoke in Spanish when there was someone to understand; other times he spoke in Eengleesh!

He was in no hurry. That appeared to be the main thing. The other boys in the bunkhouse, fellows running true to form and likable, put up with him. That is to say they tolerated him, just hoping he wasn't bringing any bugs into the bunkhouse. They played cards at times; sometimes shook dice. Pedro Morales was always ready for a couple of *pesos, y no mas.* "Me, I got

two dollars, that's all." And with luck streaming along his way, he won.

They went on tolerating him. There was Buck Minor, the foreman; Bill Carson liked him from the jump. Four-square was Buck, you'd bet your hat on it. There was little old Jimmy Cotton; used to be a wild one, did Jimmy when young, but pretty close to sixty now and beginning to be tamed by the years. There was Hank Kincaid, carrying a long scar from cheek bone to jaw, a silent man. There was Tom Jones, thick-bodied and young and blond and powerful, with blue eyes that laughed or turned into blue ice; a nice kid, judged Pedro Morales. There was a half-breed who immediately claimed fellowship with the new Pedro Morales, a young fellow named Felipe Gonzaga whom they all called Zaga for short; nice kid but maybe a bit shifty? You couldn't tell right off. There was—

Buck Minor clapped him on the back.

"You rode that buck-toothed son of the devil, they tell me, Pedro. Kid, that's some ridin'. Do it for me in the mornin', with me watchin', and I'll buy you a bottle."

"Bueno! Seguro! Sure for sure!" cried Don Pedro Morales. "Me, I am good for ride. You goin' see, Señor. That nice good leetle horse, I ride heem while I make me my cigarette. *Vamos a ver, no?"*

And next morning, with a highly appreciative group of spectators, he did ride that nice, good little horse. Bright Angel bucked all over the yard, had seemingly pondered new twists and villainies during the night, and again came close to breaking Bill Carson's backbone and snapping his head off. But Bill Carson, too, had done his pondering; he knew just about what to expect, though Bright Angel did spring a surprise or two, and in about four or five minutes Carson, still in the saddle, rolled his cigarette."

"That's some ridin'," grunted Buck Minor. "Me, I wouldn't take a try at it unless they made me."

Bill Carson, from under the wide brim of his black sombrero, cocked an eye at the ranch house. It was very early morning, only a little after dawn, too early of course for Miss Tess Edwards to be up and about. Yet he half hoped to get a glimpse of her. The ranch house seemed asleep still, a sprawling old place, wide verandas on three sides of it, screened and shaded

by seven tall poplars. A drowsy old place, certainly at this time of day.

The Chink cook yelled, "Ble'kfas' leady," and the boys stacked into their flapjacks, bacon and eggs and coffee. They polished their plates nicely and went about the day's work. Bill Carson returned to his seven devil horses.

During the morning, between bucks and kicks and dodges from bared teeth and all that, he saw Mr. Edward E. Edwards, Tess's father, for the first time. Edwards was a man well along in years; he came out onto the porch with the aid of two walking sticks; he was thin and humped over and as gray as a badger, a man who looked to be just what he was, old and sick. He pottered along to a big easy chair and sat. After a while he lighted a long, needle cigar and smoked. And sat.

Later Bill Carson, still looking for Tess to come out, saw another young woman. She came out onto the veranda in a languid, lackadaisical sort of fashion. She was young, about Tess's age, he'd guess, maybe a year or two older. She was smoking a cigarette and wore some sort of wrapper or negligée; she lounged against a post which supported the roof over the veranda. She looked pretty, Carson thought, young and slim and very blond.

It dawned on him who she was: None other than Mrs. Edwards, Tess's step-mother. And hardly older than Tess. Later he found out that his surmise was right; later he gleaned scraps of information about the young, new wife and came to form his opinion regarding her. Tess's mother had died when Tess was a baby; Edwards had gone on through the years having little to do with any other woman. In the ripeness of his years Lila, his present wife, had come his way as a secretary to fill in while his regular secretary, a mainstay who had been with him twenty years, was rather seriously ill. Lila, pretty and young and very anxious to please, made up her bright young mind at the jump to marry the old codger; he couldn't last very long they said, and he had more money than a bird has feathers. And here she was today, Mrs. Edward E. Edwards, preening herself, growing restless and impatient, smoking her cigarette and flaunting herself in her negligées. Her large, long-lashed blue eyes could grow meltingly soft on occasion; on occasion, too, they could turn into arctic ice.

Still later that morning Mr. Edwards, beckoning with a thin,

trembling hand, summoned Bill Carson who had just returned from trying out one of the other horses in a run across the fields. Carson swung down from the saddle and touched his hat brim with proper respect. Mr. Edwards spoke to him in a very soft and pleasant voice.

"You are Pedro Morales, the new horse breaker, aren't you?" he said. "My daughter told me about you. I have watched you ride, Pedro." The old man sighed. "Do you know, I'd like to be able to do what you're doing"

Carson liked the old fellow from the jump. He saw that Edwards was down and out, and seemed to be pretty much on his last legs; he saw, too, that the old fellow, weary with life now, had been quite a man in his time. Even, he suspected, there might be fiery sparks in the old chap yet, hidden under the outward wintry aspect.

"You have some nice, good leetle horses, Señor," said Bill Carson.

Edwards snorted. "You're the only man yet to ride a couple of them," he said. He glanced shrewdly at Carson, Pedro Morales rather. He said, "Why does my daughter yearn to see you murdered?"

Out flashed Bill Carson's white-toothed grin.

For ten days he worked on those horses; for ten days he let his hair and beard grow. When he saw himself in a looking glass he twisted up his villainous mustaches. Of Tess Edwards he saw little; for her part she gave out the impression of seeing nothing whatever of him, even when he saddled her horse for her. Where she rode he did not know; she rode swiftly and more than once he saw again that stormy look in her eyes. There was little happiness within the ranch house; he knew that. Between Tess Edwards and Mrs. Lila Edwards there was a gulf miles wide.

Mrs. Lila, too, went out riding at times, generally late in the afternoon and did not return until after dark. Nor did he know where she went. She rode a sleek little black pony, nicely gentled and gaited, and she wore a tricky little Mexican costume with a broad belt and a big hat with a feather in it, and tiny, ladylike spurs and gauntlets. You'd have thought she was going to have her picture taken.

He shrugged and went on with his chore. He was beginning to grow restive. He had had his fun, but when at times a whole twenty-four hours would roll by without a goading word with Tess, he felt like going on. Besides, he had his own plans and, though there was no hurry, he might as well be about them.

And the old man just sat on his shady veranda and smoked his needle cigars and watched his women folk go riding— And Bill Carson thought, He's trying to figure it all out for himself, where Tess goes, maybe, where Lila goes, and why! He got to liking the old man.

"Give me time and I'll be old like that myself some day," he grunted. "But I'm damned if I'm going to squat on anybody's porch and watch them ride away." Then he scratched his head. Who knew what was in the cards not yet dealt? Sick and old, and what could you do about things except squat and smoke—and wonder?

The next morning, early, when the boys had all scattered to work and he was giving Bright Angel a final lesson and was think ing about moving along elsewhere, Tess Edwards came out, all readied up for her ride. He saddled her horse for her without a word, without even a mocking smile. He held her horse while she mounted.

"Señorita," he said, very respectful with hat in hand, "I got thees job feenesh." He shrugged elaborately. "Maybe you pay me now, anyhow ten *pesos*, and I go."

She laughed at him. "Ten dollars?" she said. "Do you think that every time I go riding I have ten dollars in my pocket? You wait for your forty dollars until the month is up."

That was the first inkling he had that El Capitan Rancho with its thousands of acres was perhaps short of money. Acres and cattle and horses, yes. Money? No. Well, it was no affair of his; he didn't care. There were lots of big spreads nowadays that were stained with red ink; there were mortgages, there was interest to pay, and upkeep and the boys' wages—and no money, and pretty soon the bank had the ranches. All that Bill Carson could do was shrug and turn his mind to his own affairs. Yes, as he had told himself, he had loafed long enough. Time to ride over to the adjoining ranch, the Silver River Ranch, and have the final talk with Brewster Hammond. Brew Hammond, a man

he didn't know well and liked less, yet with whom he had business—or supposed that he had.

But he saw Brewster Hammond that late afternoon without going out to look for him. Lila (Mrs. Edwards), in her tricky suit and the big hat with its feather and with lights in her warm blue eyes came riding home escorted by a handsome young man, a tall, well set-up young man, yet dapper withal, with polished boots and a trim whisper of a mustache, in immaculate riding togs from big gray Stetson to gleaming spurs. That was Brewster Hammond.

And Bill Carson happened to be loafing down by the barn. He started to say, "Hello, Hammond," but didn't say a word. Instead, he smothered a grin. Why, of course Hammond didn't recognize him! They had met only once, for a brief talk by dim lamplight, and at that time Bill Carson wasn't hiding behind a thicket of black whiskers!

"Take the horses, Pedro," said Lila. She came down gracefully from her saddle. "See that Mr. Hammond's horse is well rubbed down and groomed; he will be wanting it later." She smiled engagingly at Hammond as, with her, he turned to the house. "I hope you won't be in any great hurry for your horse, Brew," she said coquettishly.

Carson took care of the horses, not for their riders' sakes but because horses were horses and deserving the best. That's what they got at his hands. While using currycomb and brush he said to himself. So that's where she rides every day. Brew Hammond. Hm.

And he found himself wondering where Tess Edwards rode. To the Silver River Ranch, too? He hoped not. Why? He didn't exactly know. But he hoped not.

When heading up into this mountainous country, Bill Carson was on pleasure bent; also, he was running out on conditions on his own ranch that he did not hanker for; further, he had a bit of business in mind. Hence the bank notes in his money belt. A couple of years ago, on a heady impulse, he had bought a big stretch of desert land, some twenty miles square, not worth, advisors told him, a red copper per acre. Just dreary reaches of sand with a sprinkling of desert growth, a handful of lizards, rattlesnakes and gaunt and hungry coyotes. But the desert acres rippled up to the little barren hills, and the hills made contact

with the slopes of the mountains, and in the mountains there was water. Bill Carson knew what Imperial Valley down on the border in California had been like before men put water in it; he knew what water had done for the blazing white sands, with water-filled canals running smoothly, green trees growing up and spreading their shade, melons and orchards blossoming like the rose. And he knew what the Mormons in their time had done in Utah, making the desert into a near paradise. And he knew his own dreams; what he was going to do with his uncounted, worthless acres! Turn unlimited water onto them, and have him his fun. He'd carve his domain up into five hundred small farms; he'd place five hundred broken-hearted, penniless families upon them; he'd build a small town, a center to take care of their needs; he'd sell them everything they wanted, at cost; he'd not only reclaim a stretch of burning desert but, along with it, he would give a lot of poor down-and-out devils a fresh chance. A beginning for new things.

And so, as he thought, he had bought the Silver River Ranch, had bought it just for its water that he could pour down into the thirsting sands. He had talked the deal over one night with Brewster Hammond; that was just before Bill Carson had streaked east for his annual couple of weeks in New York. He had left details in the hands of his friend, Harry Morton of the oil wells, Harry being a friend of Brewster Hammond. Harry had told him that everything was all right. Then Harry, as Bill Carson thought, had popped down to South America, and here was Bill Carson and his money belt.

Well, life was fun but it remained that business was business. And even in business there could be fun. There was the consummation of his deal with Brewster Hammond for the Silver River Ranch. Get that completed and Bill Carson could go down to his desert acres and turn the water in. For not only was there Silver River itself, but three cool, clear mountain lakes, natural reservoirs, and the over-spill of these into the river and the river's water now spread out among the little dry, sandy hills and to be drunk up by the near edge of the desert very much as a drop of water vanishes on the rim of a dry blotter. The thing to do was conclude business with Brewster Hammond.

He went into the bunkhouse, got out a small roll, dug out razor and brush and shaving soap. He made a lather of sorts

with cold water—saw himself in the shaving mirror, and stopped. A thought struck him: Why announce to the world, or to this small corner of it, who he was? William Gaunt Carson, oil millionaire! Why crawl out from behind his whiskers in a hurry? It would take time to put them back the way they were now. And he had the hunch that he hadn't finished for all time with Miss Tess Edwards. Why not leave things as they were?

He put away his razor without shaving.

In the early dusk he saw old man Edwards hobble out to his chair on the veranda and smoke his long cigar. Within the house there was the thumping of a piano that would be better for a tuning. Presently Tess came out; she sat on a bench against the wall and was very still. It was an hour later, with dark blossoming like a black flower, when Lila and Brew Hammond came out to the porch. Lila's voice was very gay; maybe she had had a glass or two of wine?

Then Brewster Hammond came down to the barn for his horse. Carson had it already saddled and ready for him. Hammond went up into the saddle, spurred up to the veranda, waved his hat and said a jovial goodnight and rode on his homeward way. Bill Carson, his own horse ready, waited a few minutes, saw old man Edwards make his way into the house, watched Tess and Lila sitting still, with never a word between them, saw the fine arc of a glowing cigarette-end as Lila got up and followed her husband, finally saw Tess follow. Then he went up into his saddle and rode along after Brewster Hammond.

CHAPTER V

It was a good ten miles from the headquarters here at El Capitan to the Silver River ranch house. So, true to form, Bill Carson, alias Pedro Morales, was in no hurry. Within the ten miles he would overhaul Brewster Hammond, would have a little trail-side chat with him. His aim could be achieved in the most casual manner; he would but have to say, "Howdy, Mr. Hammond. I like for talk weeth you. Me, I am frien' to Señor Beel

Carson who buy the Seelver Reever Rancho from you. Mr. Carson tell me to say he weel send all the moneys in two-t'ree day, an' weel come to leeve in your place. *Bueno?"* Something offhand like that. All very simple, done in a minute.

But it did not work out that way. The first part of the program was faultless; Bill Carson overtook Brewster Hammond within three or four miles. Hammond, hearing someone behind him, tightened his reins and swiveled in the saddle. Bill Carson drew abreast and doffed his wide hat, his hair and beard inky and his teeth snow white in the starlight.

He made his little speech.

"Who the hell are you?" demanded Hammond. He peered closer. "You're the new hand down at El Capitan!"

"*Seguro*. Sure. But that makes no matter, Señor. Like I tell you, I am frien' weeth Señor Beel Carson. He buy your rancho, he like for pay you pronto, he—"

"You're crazy," said Hammond. "I never sold my ranch to Carson. What's more, I am not going to. I am selling it to the Capitan outfit. You can tell Carson that, and tell him for me to go chase himself."

Carson's body hardened in his saddle. He spoke very softly, he came close to forgetting that he was amusing himself with playing a part, he came close to speaking the way Bill Carson would. He said, curbing himself,

"Señor Beel Carson has another frien', Señor Harry Morton. Señor Morton buys the rancho from you. He geeve you, to make eet a deal, ten thousan' dollars, no?"

"The answer is the last word in your mouth, *amigo,"* said Hammond pleasantly. "It is 'No.' Three or four months ago Harry Morton came to me and wanted to talk about buying my ranch. After a lot of jabber I gave him a sixty days' option for which he paid me a thousand dollars. The option has expired, the thousand is mine, and I hear that Mr. Harry Morton has scuttled off to South America—maybe the South Pole. You can go tell your friend Beel Carson that that's the way it is."

And he tickled his horse with his spurs and rode off.

Carson didn't move a muscle for a long time. He sat, still and rigid in his saddle, watching Brewster Hammond's departing form until it was blotted out in the dark under the pines. His perplexity was blacker than the blackest dark under the densest

pine grove. He had given Harry Morton a check for ten thousand dollars; that was one thing. He trusted Harry, that was another. And still another was that he had already bought and paid for those four hundred square miles of "worthless" sand hills and cactus flats, and had done so on the assurance that he was going to get Silver River Ranch with all its water. Without the ranch, without its water, he just had a fool's acreage of sand, cactus, lizards and their ilk and mangy, hungry coyotes.

He said aloud, "All right, all right. Let's see where we are." Where was he? Had Harry swindled him, and was that the explanation of Harry's little jaunt to parts unknown? Or was Brewster Hammond swindling him, yes, him and Harry, too? He scratched his head; he didn't have a single scrap of paper to show that he had bought anything from Hammond. There was his cancelled check for ten thousand, made out to Harry Morton. Had it been endorsed also by Brew Hammond? He couldn't for the life of him remember.

Just the same he figured that the Silver River Ranch belonged to him, or was going to belong to him pronto, or he'd know all the reasons why not. And then he had a new angle from which to ponder the affair: El Capitan Ranch where Tess and Lila and the old man made a queer trio, wanted Silver River; they, too, needed the water, and Brewster Hammond was selling out to them! There were things to think about.

It was still early. The nearest town where he could find a telephone was Las Nueces, some twenty miles away. Well—the night was young.

Las Nueces, the town of the big walnut trees, was set in a small, dimpled bowl in the hills, a small but not unlovely town. It had its rather nice houses, its nice people. And it had also such places as The Palace and the Happy Days, the Ace High. The slogan of the denizens of The Nut Tree Town was, "Here, stranger, you can get whatever you ask for." That was Las Nueces.

Bill Carson had been here before. He tied his horse at the hitching rail in front of Mountain Hotel, hung his spurs over the saddle horn and went in. Johnny Madison was behind the counter, half asleep; Carson knew him casually and John knew Carson. But not tonight. The hotel clerk saw an unprepossessing

half-breed come high-stepping in, came up out of his semi-coma and frowned. He didn't cater to that sort of trade though, of course, were the money plunked down for a room he could not conscientiously refuse it.

Bill Carson came up close and set his elbows on the counter; Johnny would know him, give Johnny a couple of seconds. But Johnny didn't know him from Adam's off ox. What Johnny Madison did was ask huskily, clearing his sleepy throat.

"Room? Two dollars. In advance."

Carson began to sputter Spanish at him. Johnny didn't know seven words in Spanish as Carson knew full well. Funny, thought Bill Carson, what a difference a few whiskers make! Bill said,

"Yo no puedo hablar Ingles, Señor." He pulled out a pocket full of silver. "Me, no talk Eengleesh, *un poquito pero no mas."* He scratched his head and wondered why, whiskers or no whiskers, Johnny didn't know him. *"Telefono?"* he asked.

Yes, there was a telephone; right here on the desk. Johnny shoved it forward and drooped back in his chair. Bill Carson got the operator after a couple of minutes of ringing for her, and gave her a long distance number; it was Los Angeles that he wanted.

He got his lawyer, Eddie Lowe, whom luckily he found at home. Eddie recognized his voice immediately and said, "Come on down, Bill; we're having a party with plenty of everything, barbecue, lots to drink and pretty girls." Carson ment to keep his business his business, spoke in Spanish; Eddie's Spanish was negligible or less than that. But Eddie was astute; he said, "Hold it, Bill; there's a girl here, Señorita Marianita just up from Mexico City, who can get you. I'll stand by while you talk to her."

A moment later Carson listened to a rippling voice, a girl's voice with dimples in it, and got his message over. The girl was quick and intelligent, a young actress from Mexico City with Hollywood aspirations, and with brains. Then Eddie Lowe came back on the phone.

"I get you, kid," he said. "I'll take care of it for you. In the morning I'll get your friend Hammond on the phone or wire him. I'll let you know. Better come down and see me. The way it sounds, you're in a jam; maybe we can drag you out. We'll see. Incidentally, you're a silly ass, you know. The idea is that when you pay something like ten grand down, you get a little scrap of

paper to show you paid it. Well, we're drinking to you, *salud y pesetas.*" That was about all of Eddie's Spanish: Health and money to you, kid. He hung up and went back to his barbecuing steaks. Bill Carson paid his telephone bill and went out.

He looked in at the Happy Days saloon and kept on going. He paused at The Palace; no, not tonight. He hung on his heel at the Ace High. Why not? He went in.

He had tarried briefly here before; he saw men whom he recognized, not that he could put a name to any man of them right off, but men he knew in a way. They didn't know him. *Bueno.* He drank a small bottle of beer, ice cold and comforting. He left his eyes drift: Faro, chuck-a-luck, roulette, poker—whatever you wanted. He scrabbled in his pockets. About nine dollars in silver. He put it down on the roulette table, playing the O and Double O. It came up nineteen. He pulled down his hat and went out. And at the time he didn't know that he had given Brewster Hammond another nine dollars. That fact he was to discover shortly.

He rode slowly back to El Capitan with much to brood upon. He thought of old man Edwards whom he liked, of Tess whom he something more than merely liked, of Lila whom he did not particularly care for. He judged that Edwards had put all his money, anyhow the major bulk of it, into the ranch, and was out on a limb. Sick and broke and worried; a tough state of affairs. He speculated on Lila's looks, her voice and eyes when she spoke with Brew Hammond, and shook his head. He pondered Brewster Hammond: The man was a damn crook and he knew it. How? How could you know a skunk for a skunk without seeing the animal? As it seemed to him the air reeked with Brewster Hammond.

And Tess? Young, lively, lovely, beautiful—and, somehow, in trouble. Part vixen and part adorable young girl, he judged her. And set as far apart from Lila Edwards as the south pole from the north pole. And Tess was as jumpy as a cat; he figured that the girl, being a thoroughbred, was carrying a part of the old man's burden. Or trying to.

The next morning, when all the boys had gone to work and before the door of the ranch house opened, Bill Carson sat under the ragged cottonwood tree down by the bunkhouse, squatting comfortably on his heels, and plucked a guitar. One thing he could

do, besides ride a horse and play a fair game of poker, was pluck guitar strings and sing. He hummed quiet little tunes.

Then, his eye on the house, he saw the door open and Tess come out. He lifted his voice. He sang.

"Quantas veces, Vida Mia."

The words, if you wanted them in English were,

"How many times, Life of my life,
I have stood here beneath your balcony!
How many times, Life of Mine,
And I have left you weeping,
Because you thought I did not come.
Oh, Mi Morena, who through your window
Gave me a small moment, and I gave you an apple;
Oh, Mi Morena, then through your window
You gave me a minute of love talk."

Tess Edwards, swinging along down to the barn, dragging on her gauntlets a bit viciously, came to a dead halt and stared at him. His hat was pushed far back, his eyes were sentimentally upturned, his slow fingers drowsed over the guitar strings. Her costume carried a belt; she hooked her thumbs into it.

"This is all you have to do, Pedro? Squat like a toad, and sing?"

He pulled off his hat and let it fall in the dust.

"I am goin' seeng thees one for you," and sang,

"Las embras todas,
Viven en calma;
No tenen alma
Ni corazon."

And so on for a couple of lively stanzas.

"I don't know what it is all about," said Tess.

But she did know the air: *La Donna Mobile.*

"The words, they mean like thees," he explained. "All the nice ladies, they live in the calmness; they ain't got no heart, they ain't got no soul. Never for them loose your sereneness,

don't mees your sleep, they ain't got no heart an' they ain't got no soul. They are ver' sweet an' nice, an' they make out they love you, but anyhow when you get t'rough, you find out, they ain't got some hearts an' some souls. They are—"

"I like your singing, which I can't understand, much better than your interpretation, Pedro," said Tess. She looked at him narrowly; that meant she drew her eyelids so close together that he could tell she was striving to stab through his outer husks and see what sort of man she had to deal with. Then she said briskly, "Haven't you anything to do this morning except thrum a guitar and make sad noises?"

He stood up, set his guitar against the wall, retrieved his hat which, with proper respect, he held in his hands, and answered her.

"You my boss, Señorita. You geeve me seven leetle horses to ride." He shrugged. "I tol' you I'm all feenesh with those horses. You got some more for me?"

"Pedro," she said sharply, "I don't believe for one minute that you are as big a fool as you pretend to be!"

He opened his mouth to look stupid. At the moment he couldn't think of anything better to do.

"Me, I am good for play the guitar, no?" said Pedro with his grin.

"No," said Tess.

When she rode away his eyes followed her until she passed out of sight in the hills. He wanted to follow her. He wanted to know where she was going. Just riding the range, seeing what the boys were going? Or possibly—going somewhere? He went down to the corral to give his string of horses a workout.

That morning for the first time he had a word or two with Lila. With Edwards first, however. Edwards came out onto the veranda and nested down in his big chair. He lighted his long cigar and blew out smoke through both nostrils; he made Bill Carson think of an old engine just getting ready for a pull up over the mountain.

"I kind of like the old gent," said Bill Carson.

Then the old gent surprised him. For the first time since Bill Carson had been on the ranch, so far as he knew, old man Edwards, thumping with both canes, made his fumbling way down the steps from the porch and started navigating across the yard,

headed you would think, in the general direction of where Bill Carson stood. Bill felt an urge to go out and help the old fellow; then he felt a stronger urge to stay where he was: Old man Edwards wasn't asking any helping hand from anybody and never would ask it.

But Bill Carson, pretending not to be watching him, did drag a bench out of the bunkhouse; he sat down on one end of it and grew busy, head down, rolling a cigarette.

He seemed startled when Edwards' shadow fell across him.

"I think you're a damned fake, Pedro," said Edwards and sat down on the bench.

Pedro appeared not to understand, to be flustered.

The old man snorted.

"You're the hell of an actor," he said.

Not getting the drift of things yet, Bill Carson kept his mouth shut while he opened his eyes eloquently and spread out his hands.

Edwards chuckled.

"Let's have the story, Pete," he said. "The whole of it, or I'll brain you with one of my walking sticks."

"But, Señor!"

"Rats. Skin 'em an' eat 'em.—Now, take this bench: It just happened to get out here when I was staggering in this general direction, didn't it? You didn't see me coming, did you? Oh, no. You're a damn liar, Pedro Morales."

"Señor!" cried Pedro Morales, very indignant. "For words like that I keel a man!"

"Oh, shut up," said Edwards. He tossed his badly chewed-up cigar away and pulled a fresh one from his pocket. "Give me a match."

Bill Carson gave him a match.

Edwards lighted up, eased himself back against the wall of the bunkhouse, shot a long plume of smoke skywards and remarked conversationally.

"You're a damn liar and a cheat and a bum actor, Pedro Morales," he said. "And besides all that, you and I both know that you are no more Pedro Morales than I am Grover Cleveland. I know you, you pup; it took me pretty close to two weeks to figure you out, but now I've got you by the tail. You're Bill Carson, that's who you are behind your whiskers."

Bill Carson had to laugh; he just couldn't help it. The old man

laughed with him. For a while they sat and smoked companionably and didn't say a word. Then,

"Want to tell me about it, Carson?" Edwards asked. "Or rather keep mum?"

Bill Carson ground out his cigarette under a boot heel.

"How come that you know me?" he asked.

"It's a fair question," Edwards conceded. "You know, Carson, I'm one of those funny guys that are anyhow half elephant when it comes to remembering. I may be as big a damn fool as you are in most things, but I've got a memory kid, that never slips and seldom sleeps. Let's see: You were in New York a couple of months ago, weren't you?"

"Yes," said Bill Carson.

"You were at the Paradise Night Club. It was about two o'clock in the morning. You were entertaining a tableful of guests. Me, I was at a table once removed from yours. I happened to know a couple of your guests; they were pretty tough ones, too. You went out with them. I knew the M.C. rather well; have known him for years. I wondered what was going to happen to you and asked him who the hell you were. He told me. Bill Carson, down in Texas."

"You've got me tagged, Colonel," said Bill Carson, surrendering.

"I remember a man, I tell you," said Edwards. "You weren't hiding behind a hedge of whiskers then, but you can't change your eyes and nose and the way your eyebrows cock up. Say, Bill, what did those two gents do to you that night?"

Bill Carson grinned, remembering.

"They shot a couple of holes in me, Colonel, me having left my guns at home. But they didn't roll me, at that; nary a nickel did they get out of me. Then I had a nice time in the hospital, then took things easy down at Atlantic City, then popped back to my ranch—then came up here."

The old man sucked at his cigar.

"I'm double damned if I ask you another question, Carson," he said. He shoved out his bony hand. "Want to shake?"

They shook hands.

"Thanks, Colonel," said Carson. "And if it's all the same to you, just don't tell anybody anything. Right?"

"Right as rain, kid," said Edwards.

"I may be digging out of here any time now. Before I go, suppose we have another few minutes of jabber? Can do, Colonel?"

"Can do," said Edwards.

He got to his feet and Bill Carson didn't help him, knowing that he didn't want any help at any time, anywhere, from anybody. And, using his two canes, Mr. Edwards went back to the ranch house, up the steps and into the house.

To himself Bill Carson remarked that it was a funny sort of world. But then no doubt it had always been a funny world and always would be. Nothing much that he could do about it.

Then Lila, all dolled up in her riding suit and the hat with the feather in it, came running down the steps. She wanted her horse saddled, in a hurry please. But, fussing with the light tendrils of her hair, she had time to smile at Pedro Morales.

"I liked your music, Pedro," she said. "Your playing on the guitar and singing."

She would flirt with any man, even with a Pedro Morales; he knew that already. He lifted his hat and made her his best south-of-the-border bow.

He helped her up into the saddle. She sat a moment looking down at him. She said,

"Pedro, please shave. You would be so nice looking then."

She rode away laughing. He did not laugh at all. He wasn't thinking about her but about an old man barging about on two canes.

"Dammit," he said amiably, "I don't know what to do."

Buck Minor, the El Capitan foreman, rode in unusually early that day, at the fag end of the afternoon instead of with the first stars. Carson saw him stride into the bunkhouse like a man stepping on the necks of his enemies. Buck Minor stripped off his shirt, lathered his face and started shaving.

Bill Carson took interest.

"Oh, hello, Pedro," muttered Buck Minor out of the corner of his mouth, and cut his lip and swore. The man was in no pleasant mood as anyone could see with half an eye. Yet his next words were a cordial invitation; he said, "I'm going into Las Nueces. Come along, Pedro. I promised you a bottle for riding that outlaw and I keep my promises."

"I don' theenk so," said Pedro Morales. "You can breeng me back my bot'."

"I ain't coming back," said Minor.

"What you mean, Señor? What ees eet? Somet'ing she bite you? What for you go to Las Nueces?"

"It's none of your damn business, Pedro. Just the same I've got seventeen good reasons for the ride. One is, it's Saturday night and I'm thirsty. Another is that I've got sixty bucks in my pants. Another is I'm mad as hell. Another is, I don't like Brew Hammond. Another, I'm going to buck the game at his damned Ace High place and tear the roof off. There's lots of reasons. Oh yes, one more: I just got fired, and I'm on my way."

"Fired? You, Señor Buck? *Y porque?* An' w'at for? An' who go for to fire you?"

"That little granddaughter of seventeen hell cats," snorted the the foreman. "She got mad and fired me sky high—and I'm quitting."

"You don' mean leetle Señorita Tess!"

"I mean Tess Edwards. And I'm mad. And you can come along or go to hell, I don't care which."

Pedro Morales shrugged; he pursed a lower lip, fingered his wild beard and seemed to ponder. Then he sighed.

"I don' like much Las Nueces," he said finally, "but I don' like the hell, too. Maybe better Las Nueces, Señor. *Seguro;* we ride to town an' you buy me my bot' to dreenk on the way home. An' now you tell me one theeng: Señor Hammond, w'at about heem an' the Ace High? He have frien's there?"

"He owns the damned place," said Buck. "And he'll be there tonight. What's more, he has invited Tess Edwards to drop in with him and see the wheels go round. And I'll be there pronto, kid; me and my sixty bucks."

"Me, I go, too," said Bill Carson promptly.

CHAPTER VI

In the little cow town of Las Nueces, Buck Minor made an angry bee line from the livery stable to the first drink place. Not so Pedro Morales. He said, "I am go for see you queek,

amigo, but right the now I got beezeness." And he headed for the barber shop.

The barber, about to close, looked at him disgustedly.

"All right, Gaucho," he said. "Only look out you don't take cold after I finish with you. Ever seen a barber shop before?"

Pedro Morales instructed him. What he wanted was his beard trimmed down to a fine point. He wanted his hair trimmed, too; *seguro,* for why not? And his mustache spiked and curled. Then he wanted to get his boots shined.

He came out of the barber shop looking like some of the old pictures of the devil. He hurried into a store, still open; he bought a new forty dollar hat, a flaming red shirt, a new and enormous silk neck scarf, canary yellow; a pink sash to go about his middle. He surveyed himself in a mirror and was gratified and impressed.

"Me," he told himself as he walked out on his heels, making the crazy wooden sidewalk creak, "I am the hidalgo now. Señor Don Pedro Morales, aha and ahaha!"

He cocked his big new hat at an angle, he rolled a thin white paper cigarette. He came to a halt, threw his unlighted cigarette away and went back to the store. He wasn't quite perfect yet, and tonight for one reason or another or for none at all he wanted perfection. Nothing less would do him. So he bought a vest; it was black and white spotted cowhide; he bought a shoulder holster. One gun he left with the store keeper; the other he slung under his arm pit. Again he looked into the mirror—and twisted up tighter his black little mustache.

There was a drug store at the corner. He paid ten dollars for a little bottle of perfume—and practically bathed in it. He bought a new pair of boots, tight, very high-heeled and paid forty dollars for them. Whether in good taste or not—he meant to shine! And Pedro Morales said softly to himself, as he stepped along with a smug little smile under his foppish little mustache, I am going to smell sweetly like a nice leetle flower!

He went seeking Buck Minor and found him at the first saloon which happened to be the Happy Days. Buck had a bottle in front of him; he took one good long look at El Capitan's horsebreaker, downed another drink and gasped, "Oh, my eye, Charlie. All you need now is a bottle of perfume. What's got into you?"

Bill Carson, alias Pedro Morales, twisted up his mustaches again, using both hands.

"I look good, no, Señor?" he said, softening his voice.

"You look to me like a bad dream down in Rio," grunted Buck Minor. He shoved the bottle invitationally. "Drink up, kid."

Carson lifted his glass. *"Salud y pesetas, y fuerza tambien,"* he said.

"Let's go eat," said Buck.

They ate; steak and onions and tomatoes, hot biscuits and pie and coffee. And it was still early, the town just beginning to bestir itself.

"Now," said Buck, "we go have an after supper drink. Then we hit the Ace High and me, my luck ready for an upward swing, we bust the damn place." He had paid for everything and still was rich with approximately fifty dollars burning a hole in his pocket.

They saw a top buggy come swirling into town, a light top buggy that would have been a feather for one horse, yet a pole had been put in the place of shafts and two racy, cream-colored horses all but ran away with it. And in the buggy were Brewster Hammond and Tess Edwards. And Tess, with the ribbons streaming backward from her big, wind-blown hat, looked bright and vivid and very, very pretty. And happy, too, thought Bill Carson.

"Me, I'd like to break that girl's neck," said Buck Minor. "And Brew Hammond's, too. And that other female, old man Edwards' wife. Every damn one of them."

"Old man Edwards, you like for break hees neck *tambien?*"

"No. He's as fine as frog's hair, the old man is. He's the only one of the crowd that's any good, poor old cuss."

They repaired, lounging along the creaking wooden sidewalk, to the Ace High. It was still early but, being a Saturday night, there was already a sprinkling of men who were athirst and who wanted to get the night started to rolling. Buck Minor said a hello or a howdy to a man here and there but was in no mood for joining any of them; he wanted to be alone as he was now, with just the half-breed trailing after him.

Again Buck put money on the bar, buying the drinks; again Pedro Morales accepted with his gleaming smile.

Now the Ace High, the most pretentious, not to say presumptuous, of the places in town or within a good many miles, consisted chiefly of a big, barnlike room cut in halves by the long double bar running from end to end. On one side of the bar you had booths, semi-secluded behind colorful curtains, with white-aproned waiters and things to eat; to drink, too, of course. On the other side were the gaming tables and anything you could put a name to that you wanted to pour down your throat.

The Ace High prided itself on its atmosphere of respectability. Ladies with their escorts might dine in perfect propriety at the semi-withdrawn tables, and have chicken and champagne if they liked. The rougher element, here to drink and play, kept to the other half of the room. Not that the ladies and their friends might not play, too; there was a separate gambling room at the rear. Not that some of them, quite respectable women, too, with a brother or husband or the town banker or lawyer as escort, did not at times poke their pretty noses into the main gambling room. At such times the men there, rough-looking crowd that they were, took off their hats and refrained from undue cussing. If any one of them chanced to be top-heavy with drink and forgot his society manners, he was unostentatiously removed.

Buck Minor's eyes, inclined to be moody, flickered across the games already running. There was only a sprinkling of men in the place, perhaps a couple of dozen, and scarcely half that number had as yet been drawn to the gambling tables.

"Me," said Buck, "I'm going to make me some easy money. I can feel the luck bubbling up inside me."

"Eet's might be you feel the wheesky get to work," suggested Pedro Morales. "That wheesky, she's strong like one ten-mule team."

"Come ahead," said Buck, and led the way to the faro layout, well across the big room. His companion followed, stepping a thought daintily in his new, tight boots, and as he went let his eyes tarry briefly with the roulette table; there were three men playing, plainly just warming to the game.

At faro there were but two. Buck sat down and placed his small stack of silver dollars in front of him, watching the dealer's swift, sure hands at the box. The dealer gave no sign of seeing him. The lookout on his high stool, a thin, chill-looking young man with an incipient, pale, nicely scissored mustache, let a pair

of all but colorless eyes drift bleakly over the newcomers, eyes with a far away look in them that went from crown of hat to boot-heels, missing nothing, and then wandered uninterestedly, impersonally away.

Buck made his cigarette, watched the deft hands and the cards as they came out of the box and hunched his chair closer. Pedro Morales glanced away, over his shoulder at the wheel. He put his hand into his pocket and showed Buck Minor a handful of silver dollars and halves.

"I theenk I go for play the wheel," he said.

"That's a fool's game, or a lady's," scoffed Buck. "Pull up a chair here and squat, Mexico. Over there you'll lose your shirt; it's just a crazy game of luck with the chances all against you. Here you get a break."

"I like for try," said Pedro Morales, and stepped in the general direction of the roulette table. And, with Buck no longer observing, he scooped into his pocket for more silver dollars.

He meditated while the ivory ball went whirring around its little race track and stacked ten of his silver dollars on number four. The ball slowed down, hesitated, clicked and chose the double zero, and the dealer nonchalantly raked in all bets. He set the ball spinning again, and Pedro Morales put up another stack of silver, another ten, on number four. The double zero repeated.

Pedro Morales shrugged and moved away. But whereas it might have been supposed that he had had enough fun for his twenty dollars, he was merely going in quest of further ammunition. Across the room was the cashier's cage, the cashier drumming idly with his knuckles. He watched idly the approach of the dandified south-of-the-border visitor. Presented with a five hundred dollar bank note he reached into his drawer for change.

"Feefty pesos een seelver, Señor," said Pedro Morales politely. "The other moneys een feefty dollar beels, no?"

He stuffed the bank notes into his pocket, scooped up the silver in his hands and returned to the wheel. During all this time he had made sure that Buck Minor was not looking; he was pretty sure that no one in the house with the exception of the cashier had noted the transaction.

Back at the table he was regarded by the dealer with the first flicker of interest. He stacked his fifty silver dollars neatly before him in five exact piles. Then he leaned forward and played

one stack on number four. Twenty seven came up. Another ten on number four— and another—and another—and once more. Five whirls and his fifty dollars gone. Pedro Morales sighed and shook his head.

Then he rolled a cigarette, looked the room over, saw that Buck Minor, who never withdrew his eyes from his own game, had a small but growing stack before him. He dug into his pocket, extracted what would appear to be a lone fifty dollar bill, and tossed it across the table.

"I like for get back my seelver, Señor," he said. He showed a white-toothed smile. "I theenk my seelver, she ees lucky."

One of the men at the table laughed. He didn't look to be a local product; a city man rather, maybe a small business man from Albuquerque. He said along with his laugh.

"Doesn't act very lucky so far, kid!"

"Ah!" said Pedro Morales, recovering his silver. "But the luck, you know, Señor, she ees like a nice lady. She like for make you wait leetle beet, no?"

He put his stack down on the red this time. "Maybe number four like for make me wait leetle while, too, eh?"

Red came up. "Chips this time, or want your fifty dollar bill back?" asked the dealer, and was as smoothly polite as Pedro Morales himself.

"Cheeps, pliz," said Pedro.

Ten blue chips were shoved across the table to him. He placed the chips alongside his stacked silver which he had allowed to stand on the red. The ball was spinning already; he heard it click into its chosen slot and did not remark whether it were red again or black this time, or maybe even green. That was because all the way across the room, beyond the bar, he had caught a glimpse of two people who had evidently only just now arrived. They were Tess Edwards and Brew Hammond.

He could tell that it was the first time Tess had ever been here from the way in which she looked around, trying to take in everything all at once, and that Brewster Hammond was showing her the place. He saw that the gaming tables had caught her interest, and that her companion and guide was suggesting that she look them over at close quarters. She seemed very bright and gay, a delicate flush in her cheeks, her eyes sparkling.

The little rake employed by the roulette dealer reached out and

swept the table clean again; Pedro Morales was just in time to see his money and chips swept away. The man from Albuquerque laughed again and remarked in his chuckling fashion, "What about your lucky silver dollars now, Mexico?"

Pedro Morales shrugged.

"I go for buy them back one more time," he said, with another shake of the head and a sigh to go along with the gesture, and put down another fifty dollar bill. He saw out of the corner of his eye that Tess and Hammond were coming straight toward the wheel; hastily he pocketed all but ten of his silver dollars.

He appeared to be completely absorbed in the game, not to note the two when they stopped almost at his elbow. He stacked and restacked his coins; his air was one of hesitancy, almost of timidity. But when the little ball was spinning he again set his ten dollars on number four.

Tess Edwards was looking at him curiously; at first sight she had not recognized him with his trimmed beard and hair and gaudy new finery; her nostrils quivered delicately as she whiffed perfume and made out its source of origin. She knew him well enough now. She came close to gasping at the picture he constituted. As he slightly turned and appeared to mark her presence for the first time her nose twitched visibly and she lifted her handkerchief to her nostrils at the moment that he gave her a bow and his flashing smile and lifted his hat.

"You like number four," said the garrulous stranger from Albuquerque.

Pedro Morales' smile was transferred to him.

"I am tell you w'y, Señor," he said affably. "You see, I bet on the four because I theenk of *mi novia;* I am theenking of my swit-heart and in her nice name there ees jus' four letters! Eet ees the bes' luck for me!"

Any girl, listening to a statement like that, would automatically have thought of the number of letters in her own name. Hm. T-e-s-s. She wondered what this half-breed's girl would be named; Juana? No, five letters? Rosita? No, six. Rosa! Four letters.

Hammond touched her elbow.

"This is only a piker's game," he said. "Let's see if I can't show you something with more life in it."

But she was in no hurry to go; there was money on the table and the ball, a most devilishly fascinating thing, was still racing

around its track. It doesn't take long for the ivory ball to complete its whirring dance and come to its brief significant rest, merely long enough for the deliberate players to get their bets down, yet much can happen in even so short a time. Pedro Morales glanced one way and saw that Buck Minor was still absorbed in his play; his gaze touched Tess's eager face, though scarcely seeming to do so; it wandered on across the room and beyond the bar toward the curtained booths—and he started at what he saw, and again didn't note immediately where the ball, with its final click, came to rest. He saw two other familiar faces, was mildly surprised at seeing one of them, was considerably surprised at the other, and was puzzled most of all to see the two together.

They were Lila Edwards and Bill Carson's lawyer from Los Angeles. Lila Edwards and Eddie Lowe together, seemingly old friends. And Carson had had no inkling that the two knew each other.

Then he noted that they, too, were headed toward the wheel.

Under his breath it was Bill Carson, not Pedro Morales at all, who said a very eloquent *damn.*

CHAPTER VII

His glance strayed back to the table and he was treated to another little start. Number four had won. Shoved across the table there came to him a goodly stack of blue chips.

Tess Edwards, not knowing the game, having no idea what sums the chips represented, did know that he had wagered ten dollars and had won! It looked so simple, so ridiculously easy!

She murmured in a half whisper to Brew Hammond,

"And he made ten dollars as quick as that?"

Hammond stared down at her and came near snorting.

"You've just watched your hired hand win three hundred and fifty dollars," he told her, and neither his voice nor look registered any pleasure.

The girl's lips parted, remained parted a moment. Pedro Morales drew in his winnings and was rolling a lazy cigarette. She

stared at his face; the man didn't even seem to realize, any more than she had, that he had just gathered in more than the third part of a thousand dollars! A forty-dollar-a-month horse-breaker making as much money in a few seconds as it would take him the better part of a year to earn! And seemingly to be thinking about something else—or about nothing at all!

Then Lila Edwards' voice jarred along her nerves and whipped her about to confront Lila and the Los Angeles lawyer. Lila looked as pretty as a picture, as bright as a spring morning; if Tess sparkled, Lila bubbled and frothed. Tess looked at her curiously, then transferred her inquiring glance to Brew Hammond. No one here but Tess herself knew that she had come with Hammond simply to keep Lila away from him. Though maybe Lila guessed.

Lila, bubbling with what went very well for spontaneity, cried, "Why, hello, Brew! What on earth are you doing in these foreign parts? Hello, Tess; think of running into you here! Oh yes; this is Mr. Lowe." She gave a light, casual touch to the introductions but added, "Mr. Edwin J. Lowe, you know; everybody knows Mr. Lowe, the Los Angeles attorney." She said it as though there were but one Los Angeles attorney and here she had him in tow. She gave his arm a squeeze. "We're old friends, aren't we, Eddie?"

Attorney Lowe, whose thoughts seemed to have strayed, said, "Eh? What? Yes; sure we are, Lila," and shook hands with Brewster Hammond and appraised Tess Edwards with eyes that were frankly admiring. A little man was the lawyer, no bigger than Napoleon whom somehow he suggested, prematurely near-bald, a man overflowing with energy, the nearest thing possible to a human dynamo, round-faced and genial, and with a remarkably alert and intelligent pair of eyes taking in everything shrewdly through his over-sized spectacles. Those eyes of his, until Lila's gushing words disturbed him, were bent penetratingly on the dandified Pedro Morales; a puzzled half frown puckered Attorney Edwin J. Lowe's brow.

As for Pedro Morales, making sure that no one was paying him the scantiest attention at the moment when all eyes were on the lawyer's face, he bestowed upon his friend and attorney, Eddie Lowe, a particularly baleful glare, a glare meant to prevent the astute Mr. Lowe from letting his tongue slip. As yet it seemed that the lawyer wasn't dead sure who this Mexican dandy was,

never having dreamed of seeing Bill Carson fitted out as he was tonight, but Pedro Morales, knowing his man, knew also that it wouldn't be long now.

Lila was babbling, "I love roulette, do you, Brew? Don't you, Eddie?" And Eddie was chatting with Tess who told him that this was the first time she had ever seen a roulette table, but that it did look fascinating, and Eddie was extracting a fat and prosperous-looking wallet from his pocket.

Pedro Morales Carson, ignoring all of them, since by all he was ignored quite as was his due as a hired man from El Capitan, placed a hundred dollars on the red, and red obliged, doubling his stake for him. He didn't drag any of the chips down, his eyes wandered away to the faro layout and Buck Minor; the ball started whirring again and Tess Edwards, realizing that Pedro had won another hundred dollars and was leaving the whole two hundred on the red came close to calling out to him in her impulsive way. She bit her lip just in time. What affair was it of hers anyhow? It would serve him darned well right if he lost it all.

But he didn't lose. She gasped a second time when she saw another two hundred in chips shoved across the table to him! Mercy! How much had the man made in just a minute or two! Hundreds, literally hundreds of dollars!

Eddie Lowe's bulging wallet was open and disgorging. With a grin, an impish sort of grin characteristic of the man, he moved closer to the table, coming elbow to elbow with Mr. Pedro Morales Carson.

Carson left four hundred dollars standing on the red. Mr. Edwin J. Lowe extracted four one hundred dollar bills from his wallet and dropped them on the black. And the dealer spun the ivory ball, and the ivory ball ran along right merrily, and Tess Edwards, in whose soul there was more of the gambler than she knew, held her breath—and the ball dropped and clicked and hesitated and settled on the black. Away like the snowflake on the river went four hundred dollars in chips from Mr. Pedro Morales Carson's pile; the dealer merely lifted it across to Mr. Lowe's. And Mr. Lowe chuckled pleasantly.

"I hope I didn't break your luck, Señor," he said affably to his neighbor.

"Eet ees *nada,*" said Señor Morales with a shrug. "To lose sometimes ees good; that way some more good luck, she come

back queek."

He changed his play; until you had the urge, the hunch to pick a number, you merely stalled and broke pretty nearly even, thus keeping your hand in and not going broke prematurely. He played a hundred dollars on the even numbers.

Eddie Lowe promptly played a hundred on the odd.

Number seventeen came up. Señor Morales' hundred dollars went the way of the snowflake. Attorney Lowe added to his stack of chips and chuckled again. Further he taunted Bill Carson with that grin of his which could range all the way from the cherubic, through the impish and into the pure diabolic. It was the diabolic voltage that he turned on now. Bill Carson's expression did not change, or at any rate no change was to be observed through the screen of his beard. But under the table with none to see and only one to feel, he screwed a high boot heel into Eddie Lowe's toe.

Don Pedro Morales sighed and extended his hands weakly. He said to the lawyer at his elbow, "Money, she's one funny theeng, no, Señor? She come an' she go away jus' like the weend."

"Broke, Don Juan?" asked Lowe. "I've a hunch your luck is just coming good now. I'll stake you to a hundred on a fifty-fifty split. How about it?"

Pedro Morales explored his pockets, knowing by the way just where to explore first; there was that forty in silver he had put out of sight on seeing Tess Edwards in the offing. He drew it out triumphantly.

"Gracias, Señor," he cried softly, "but look! Ahaha! You see, een my pocket when I am weening I hide thees for save! *Caramba,* forty dollars, she ees how much I make by work hard for one mont', and I theenk I am goin' kip her!" He shrugged. "Like you say, Señor, my luck, she's comin' back to Pedro."

"The fool," thought Tess. "And just now he had four or five or six hundred dollars, I don't know how much!" And still she was edging closer to the table; she was scarcely conscious of what her hands were doing: they were rather furtively opening her purse. She had ten or twelve dollars with her—

Lila, who loved money as passionately and as frankly as any young woman ever did, was hovering at Eddie Lowe's elbow.

"Oh, I wish I had brought some money with me!" she murmured. If he would stake a perfect stranger, a common half-breed laborer at that, surely—

And she knew him, as she had said. It was the most natural thing in the world for him to part freely with his earnings, winnings or accumulations. The second most natural thing for him, by the way, was to acquire the coveted commodity. He promptly slipped a hundred dollars into her hands and Lila, her cheeks pinker than ever, gave him the most fleeting of smiles; then for a little there were no more smiles for anybody. She set in dead earnest to make a hundred dollars into some Arabian Nights amount. But she did so cautiously! Oh, in her way a very cautious young woman was Lila Edwards. She traded in her chips for white ones, one dollar each. Her brow puckered; her lips grew into a straight line; they grew pale as she squeezed the color out of them.

Eddie placed ten dollars on the zero.

Lila placed a dollar alongside his ten, another dollar on nineteen, a third dollar on the odd to win.

Pedro Morales briefly removed his hat and put down ten dollars on his number four, ten dollars for his *novia*.

Tess had her purse opened; she had a five dollar bill in her tense fingers. The ball was already speeding on its way. She started to play the red—no, the black! She changed her mind; oh, it was too late now! She'd wait for the next time. No, it wasn't too late; the ball seemed to be racing swifter than ever! She'd play a number; that was the way to win in roulette—if you did win! She'd play number eleven—no, not eleven but number one! She wondered, Did number one ever win? But she must hurry—

What on earth impelled her at the last moment she did not in the least know. She did not feel that she was doing anything of her own volition. She stood back just after she had placed her bet, just in time, and her five lay with Pedro Morales' ten silver dollars—on number four!

That tantalizing little ivory ball at the very end of proceedings seemed to emulate her in not knowing its own mind, about to choose one number, then skipping along somewhere else. But in the end it stopped, as do all roulette balls.

And, most obligingly, it stopped on number four!

Tess let out a small squeal of delight. It might almost have

been termed an ecstatic squeal.

"How much did I win? How much did I win?" she asked excitedly, and naturally asked it of Pedro Morales, not altogether conscious of whom she was addressing, just asking the one other person who, like herself, was on number four.

Lila flashed a quelling glance at her.

"It's not exactly anything to go wild over, Tess," she said.

"You ween, Señorita," said Pedro, "jus' the one half w'at I ween; I play the ten, you play the five. So eef I make three hundred feefty dollars, you make one hundred seventy-five."

Eddie Lowe grinned at the radiant Tess.

"Don't let Lila get you down," he chuckled. "She's just sore she lost her three bucks!"

Tess laughed, quite gay. And, without even looking at Lila, she answered brightly,

"Oh, she's just coming the heavy step-mother, you know!"

Lila's eyes stabbed angrily at her; she didn't say anything. And to herself Tess admitted, "Cat! That's you, Tess Edwards. But it serves her right."

With the general attention directed elsewhere Bill Carson gathered up his gleanings and moved unostentatiously away; he'd find the chance for a word with attorney Lowe later on. He cashed in his chips at the cashier's cage and carried the gleanings in his hand, in fifty dollar bills this time. Buck Minor having had a run for his very limited money was just getting up, cleaned out. Bill Carson put a hand on his shoulder and shoved him down into his chair.

"Me, I do pretty good at the wheel, no, Buck?" He thrust the bills before Buck's widening eyes. "Thees time I stake you." He dropped a fifty. "You lucky this time. Sure for sure, me, I know."

"Hell's bells!" said Buck Minor fervently, all but devoutly, and took the money.

"See you later, Señor Buck," said Bill Carson, and looked across the room at the roulette table. Lila alone was still playing, eager and earnest, and losing, he thought; she would be a bad loser just as she would be a bad winner. Eddie Lowe had lost interest in the game with the departure of his masquerading friend. Tess Edwards stopped with the one play, a hard thing for most folks to do, a very hard thing for Tess tonight; but she was nearly two hundred dollars to the good and she had a place to

put every cent nowadays. Clearly the party at the wheel was as good as over.

Tess announced that she must hurry back to the ranch. Brew Hammond began to raise objections; the night was in its infancy, she had scarcely more than got here—Yes, but her father was alone at the ranch; she hadn't realized that Lila was going to be away, too.

Lila was losing her temper over the game. She lost and lost and lost. Not a single one of her dollar bets did her any good. She thought she would recoup by doing as Eddie and Pedro Morales had done, playing as nearly safe as possible; playing on a color that paid even money. She placed ten dollars this time, ten on the black; it came up red. She bit her lip and doubled her stake; twenty dollars—and at the last minute shifted it to the red; black showed. She bet a single dollar on the odd; number four again, and even. That crazy number four. She reached out and placed ten dollars, looking desperate now, on number four—Oh, what a little fool she was being; she snatched back her ten and placed it again on the safer red.

That crazy number, number four, was the winning number.

"I was going to play that! I would have won three hundred and fifty dollars!"

Brew Hammond hastily suggested supper. Lila slammed down what few remaining chips she had on red again. Again it was black.

She looked up at Eddie Lowe dolefully.

"I have lost all your money!"

"I really have to go, Brew," said Tess. "Do you mind terribly? Oh, I know; I can get a saddle horse at the livery stable—" Then she thought and looked down at her dress.

Hammond looked at his watch. "Can't you wait an hour or so, Tess?" he said. "You know I told you I had a bit of business in town tonight."

Eddie Lowe came to the rescue, to Tess's rescue and his own; he wanted a word with Bill Carson and realized that he couldn't have it unless he got rid of these people.

"I can drive out out to the ranch in no time, if you say the word," he offered. "How about you, Lila?"

Lila looked swiftly at Brew Hammond; if he'd ask her to linger on it was patent that she wouldn't refuse an evening in Las Nueces, for the litttle town, after a stretch at the ranch, was to

her like a thirsty man's dip in cool water. Hammond, however, didn't appear to understand. Lila pouted but the thing was settled as Lowe would have it.

He had left his car to be serviced three or four blocks down the road. As he hurried away he tried unsuccessfully to locate Bill Carson, but Carson had seen him and slipped out a side door, meeting him on the sidewalk.

"Look here, Bill—"

"Chop it, Eddie," said Carson sharply. "I don't want us seen together. I'll meet you later, when—"

"I'm taking the two girls out to the ranch right now. I'll be back as soon as I can make it. Meet you here?"

"Or at the hotel. I'll have a room there. Ask for Pedro Morales. Now beat it; they're apt to pop out any second."

Eddie Lowe scurried away. Carson, lounging in the shadows looked back into the Ace High. He saw Tess go to the cigar counter; she was buying a box of cigars!

"Good kid," he muttered. "With money in her purse she's remembering the old gent at home. Which is a lot more than Lila would ever think of."

He saw Lila and Brew Hammond talking together, waiting for word that the car was outside. Tess, her purchase made, glanced at them, then shrugged and stepped outside. Looking this way and that, perhaps to see which way Eddie Lowe had gone, her eyes rested on Pedro Morales, drawn to him by the glowing end of his cigarette. She stepped closer.

"Is that you, Pedro?"

"Si, Señorita."

"You are lucky tonight, Pedro. You are a rich man now, aren't you?"

His grin flashed out at her through the gloom. "*Si, Señorita, muy rico.* Lucky? An' lucky, too. I theenk I got to thank you for that, no? Maybe you breeng me the good luck!"

"I thought it was your *novia* who brought your luck! The girl you were thinking about when you played number four!"

He didn't answer, but stood looking at her steadily. She thought that she saw the flash of his eyes that were unshadowed now by any hat brim, since he had removed his hat when she spoke and was twirling it slowly with his brown fingers.

She drew back a quick step or two, queerly stirred, almost

frightened by that steady, shadow-veiled and therefore unreadable, mysterious gaze of his.

"You wanted to leave El Capitan," she said stiffly. "Come to me tomorrow—come Monday, and—"

Brew Hammond and Lila came outside and she hurried to rejoin them. A moment later a long, racy looking car pulled up at the sidewalk, Tess and Lila got in, good-nights were called between Hammond and those in the car, Hammond reentered the Ace High and Bill Carson walked to the hotel to secure a room. And wondered, as he went, what business it was that kept Brew Hammond in town and away from Tess Edwards. He was to get an inkling of the nature of that "business" within a very few minutes.

Registering at the hotel where he secured a room with two beds, he put his name down—Pedro Morales, rather—under the single other entry for the day: S. B. Quinton, Albuquerque. And now he was able to place definitely that man at the roulette wheel whom he had felt vaguely that he had seen before somewhere, in Albuquerque, he had fancied it might be. And right he was. Steve Quinton who operated a pool hall with small private rooms at the rear, Steve Quinton of no very savory reputation and of an old state penitentiary record. He wondered idly what brought the man up here. But for one thing men said that Quinton had many an iron in many a fire, and for another it was none of Carson's business; he might have said of the matter, as the old timers used to say, "Don't know, don't care, not the least interested and don't give a damn." Later he wouldn't say that at all.

With his lamp lighted and turned low, he lay stretched out on one of the beds, his hands clasped behind his head, his speculative eyes on the ceiling. Here was as good a place as any to await Eddie Lowe's return, and meantime he let his thoughts stray. They began with Tess Edwards, Tess going places with Brew Hammond, and they carried on with Tess winning along with him on number four and ended with Tess as he had seen her outside on the sidewalk, as he had seen the last of her on her way home. She wasn't a money-grabber like Lila, yet how welcome a few hundred dollars had been!

And he wondered, too, about Eddie Lowe's presence here tonight. Well, he'd know about that soon enough. And, with a half grin, he thought of Buck Minor and his whirl at faro; he'd have

to drop in at the Ace High presently and see how Buck was making out. He was fully prepared to find that Buck had gone on a bender and would need the arm of a friend to stagger to bed on.

He scarcely noted when the door of the room adjoining his was opened and a man entered. In the darkness the man knocked a water glass off a table and swore angrily; Carson did note that, and snorted. Likely the man from Albuquerque had lost more than he liked and was in an evil mood. Sounded on edge and jumpy, too, thought Carson, and let his thoughts drift elsewhere.

He hoped Eddie would hurry.

It was some ten minutes later when Quinton's door was jerked open and another man entered his room. Carson heard Steve Quinton jump up from his chair, heard the chair legs scrape and squeak on the bare floor.

"Hellow, Brew," said Quinton, and again his voice sounded tense. "So you came, did you?"

"What the hell do you think you want this time, Quinton?" said Hammond, his own voice curt, unpleasant, unfriendly.

Quinton said hastily,

"I told the clerk downstairs you'd be along; I told him to send you right up."

"Damn you!" growled Hammond. "What did you want to do that for? Didn't I tell you—"

So here was Brewster Hammond's business, thought Carson—with the man from Albuquerque. Yet though the two of them had been at the roulette table together never a single word had passed between them, not so much as a look as far as Bill Carson had noted.

"I'm not taking any chances, Hammond!" muttered Quinton. Then he laughed. He had a queer, unpleasant sort of laugh, a queer laugh. From it, from the tone of his voice, Carson received an odd, mixed feeling: It was as though the man was both afraid and inclined to threaten. A jackal of a man, the type to both whimper and snarl, to tuck his tail between his legs at the same time that he showed his teeth.

"Why do you waste time asking what I want?" he snapped.

"Shut up! Don't yell, you fool!" Hammond lowered his own voice; he had come in in a rage, but now no doubt bethought himself that if private business were to be kept private men should not shout to the housetops. The conversation was short;

their voices remained subdued and very few words penetrated the thin board partition to reach Bill Carson. Once he heard Hammond name the man a fool again; once he heard the name of Hammond's ranch, the Silver River; once the voice of the man from Albuquerque rose to the words, ". . . and I tell you that Harry Morton . . ." Hammond lifted his own voice enough to cut him down. There were again subdued mutterings and Carson gained the impression that the two were on the verge of an open quarrel regarding some sort of transaction—and then Brew Hammond went out and slammed the door after him.

The man left behind locked his door; Carson heard the bolt shot home. Then he heard Steve Quinton chuckle softly, heard him muttering to himself—and a few minutes later Quinton himself left the room.

Bill Carson allowed the man time enough to get downstairs and out of the house, then followed. Outside, he saw him going back along the dark street, headed again to the Ace High. Carson himself entered the gambling place by the side door as he had left it and saw his man standing at the bar; saw him down two quick drinks and thought that he looked as though he needed them; watched him take the third. With that Steve Quinton appeared to perk up; the strained look left his face and a slow flush replaced the near pallor which he had brought along with him from his interview with Brew Hammond.

Quinton made a bee line to the cashier's table, another bee line to the wheel. This time he had plenty of money; no longer was he playing any piker's game but plunking down sizable bets. He laughed that odd laugh of his when he raked in his first killing.

Plenty of money now, all of a sudden! Where he had gotten it was plain enough. But why did Hammond shell out? Blackmail, of course.

Those words in the hotel room, ". . . and I tell you Harry Morton . . ." and Hammond's angry command to shut up, those words came back to Carson now. Harry Morton—the crooked deal Brewster Hammond had put over on him—and now blackmail—

Before morning a bullet, drilling a neat hole through Bill Carson's brand new hat, gave him further food for thought.

CHAPTER VIII

Buck Minor, flushed of face and wild-eyed, came weaving his way over to the bar. Steering his erratic course he saw Pedro Morales dimly through a sort of reddish fog.

"Come ahead, kid," he said, speaking clearly enough but with difficulty, spacing his words like the footsteps of a man making his way across slippery stepping stones. "What we need is a drink."

Bill Carson, of no mind for a drink just now, yet wishing no argument with Buck in his present mood, stepped along with him to the bar. Buck began digging into his pockets and strewing silver and bank notes on the wet bar.

"Cut her in two piles, kid," he commanded. Glass in hand he turned his back on the bar, hooked a high heel over the foot rail and got his elbows solidly planted on the mahogany. "Fifty-fifty on your stake."

He downed his liquor, not noticing that Bill Carson failed to join him. Carson gathered the money up and stuffed it back into Buck's pocket. He said,

"No hurry, Buck. Tomorrow."

Mistily through his alcoholic fog Buck Minor managed to focus his blurry eyes upon a face of which he did not approve. It was Brewster Hammond's face which seemed to be bearing down on Buck like a pirate craft through a fog. Buck Minor didn't like Brew Hammond, didn't like anything about him, never had liked him or anything about him and was in exactly the proper vein to say so. Upon Buck's face dawned an uncertain sort of expression which Buck intended for a sneer. He said rather more loudly than was necessary, speaking in his slow and laboredly distinct fashion,

"Hammond, you're a louse. You always was. I wouldn't know as much about skunks as you know, but if ever lice breed on skunks, that's the kind of louse you are."

Having expressed himself, Buck Minor laughed derisively. He slapped his leg and started out to say it all over again, and the slap sounded loud in the suddenly stilled room.

Bill Carson caught him by the arm and said sharply, "Shut up, Buck! You're drunk. Keep your mouth shut."

Hammond, some ten steps away, had stopped in his tracks, staring with close-lidded eyes at the man who had read his title clear for him. Buck Minor shoved Carson away and lunged out across the floor toward the man he didn't like. Hammond stood perfectly still, watching him, and his fists hardened at his sides. As Buck was about to express himself further Carson caught up with him and took him by the arm again.

"Buck, you're making a fool of yourself—"

"Keep out of this, you damned greaser," snapped Hammond.

But Carson didn't mean to keep out of it. He said coolly, "I'll take care of him, Hammond. He—"

"I tell you, keep out! I'll take care of him myself!"

"But, man, can't you see he's drunk, damned near dead drunk? He doesn't know what he's saying—he's in no condition to fight back, if that's what you have in mind. He—"

Again Buck shook him off. "You're a liar, Pedro," he muttered. "I ain't drunk and I can lick my weight in wildcats, and Brew Hammond's a louse and a crook and an egg-suckin'—"

He lurched forward and took a wild swing at Hammond's hot, angry face. Hammond's right fist came up from his hip and caught Buck Minor on the chin; Buck went reeling back and crashed to the floor. A moment he lay there, shaking his head slowly from side to side.

Awkwardly he got to his feet. Making his big fists into something akin to war clubs, he bore down on the man who had floored him.

Bill Carson stepped swiftly between him and Brew Hammond, thrusting Buck backwards with a shove of the flat of his hand, saying to Hammond,

"He asked for it and you gave it to him. Fair enough, if you like. But no more, Hammond. It's too much like using hobnailed boots on a man who's down."

There were bright banners of red rage in Hammond's arrogantly handsome face; the blazing anger within him seemed to kindle small hot flames in his eyes.

"Get out of my way, you mongrel half-breed!" he roared, and caught Bill Carson by the shoulder and whirled him aside, and bore down upon Buck Minor.

In a flash, his own eyes hardening and narrowing between their lids, Carson sprang back between the two men.

"I tell you, Hammond, lay off! And keep your hands off me while you're at it. There's no trouble between you and me—yet. And I don't like the stench of your hands."

"Get out!" stormed Hammond. "Drunk or sober, no man can —I'll beat the damn fool half to death!"

"You dirty coward!" said Bill Carson, growing savage with his own wrath.

Hammond lashed out at him, meaning to do to him with one blow what he had done to Buck Minor. So swift and sure was the blow that Bill Carson, though he saw it coming and ducked, caught it on the jaw and was sent reeling back. It is likely that he would have fallen had he not crashed into Buck Minor's precariously balanced body; as it was, Buck went down the second time while Carson remained on his feet.

"You're all the things that Buck called you and a few more, Hammond," Bill Carson said.

Hammond rushed him. Bill Carson, all eagerness now that his dove of peace role was over and done with, met him half way. There was no thought in either man of blocking and boxing or any sort of finesse, just the tremendous and growing urge to beat the other man into a pulp. Buck Minor, seeing what was afoot, ran back to the bar and snatched up a full quart whisky bottle and came running back with the bottle swung up above his head, meaning to bring it down on Hammond's. It took three or four men to wrench his weapon away and then hold him.

"It's my fight, dammit!" yelled Buck Minor. "Dammit, it's my fight!"

But it was Bill Carson's fight and Brew Hammond's, and they joined issue with all the directness and blind fury of two maddened old bulls. The impact of blows, of a hard fist beating into a man's face, into his body, sounded loud in the quiet room. Bill Carson, caught again on the chin with Hammond giving all he had and grunting with the effort, went rocking crazily backward on his heels. Buck's whisky bottle had been knocked out of the hands of one of Buck's captors, and went rolling; Carson trod on it and went down sprawling. Hammond leaped upon him, bright victory in his eyes, as Carson sprang up; Hammond landed on his jaw this time and again, having failed as yet to

regain his balance, Bill Carson went down. A man whooped, some admirer or friend or retainer of Brew Hammond's set, crowing.

If ever a man truly saw the bright, primitive color of red, Bill Carson saw it then. He moved to get up; Hammond stood over him, eager for the kill, his fists cocked for the most savage blow of all as the fallen man came up and before he could have time to gain his equilibrium.

"Why don't you kick him while he's down, you louse!" yelled Buck Minor, straining mightily to break free from the arms which held him, near blubbering though swiftly sobering.

"Take your time to get up, Don Pedro," Hammond jeered. "I'm in no hurry; I'll wait for you."

Carson shook his head slowly, trying to shake the searing rage out of it, and he took his time. The man who had whooped, laughed. And while he was still laughing Bill Carson moved. This time he shot himself into action in a flash like a striking snake coming out of its coils; he leaped up and backward and to one side at once in a sort of corkscrew explosion, and Brew Hammond's fist despite all its ugly lethal intent merely grazed the side of his head. Hammond, through the violence of his own effort was thrown off balance for an instant, and short as that instant was, Bill Carson was on him like a young tornado before Hammond could recover himself.

The man who had whooped and laughed no longer did either, but stood with his mouth flabbily agape. A shrill blood-curdling yell burst from Buck Minor as Bill Carson went to work with a will.

He smashed his fist into Hammond's jeering face and battered the jeer off it. His knuckles were like a sledge hammer as they battered through Hammond's ineffective guard and to his mouth, and blood spurted and ran down Hammond's jaw. Where Bill Carson's right hand had gone, his left hand followed, battering Hammond's broken lips. Hammond lashed back and landed, but Bill Carson had ducked so that the blow skidded off the side of his head, and as it did so Carson's fist came up from low down and took Hammond in the spot he favored when he was dishing it out to another man, on the chin, and Hammond went tottering backward, and Bill Carson was on top of him, still battering. One blow all but closed Brew Hammond's left eye. An-

other blow, slid under Hammond's guard and took him like a battering ram, and from that point on Mr. Brewster Hammond of the Silver River Ranch took the most unmerciful beating of his life, the most ruthless punishment that any man here had ever seen meted out to another. For a space Bill Carson, a man who rarely lost his temper, let himself go. He came closer than he knew to committing murder. Even when Hammond, his legs turned into water, his breath gone, both eyes all but knocked out of their sockets, went down, Bill Carson stood over him ready to deliver, as before him Brew Hammond had thought to deliver, the coup de grâce. But Hammond did not get up. He couldn't. Men who had been holding Buck Minor now turned him loose to go to the fallen man and lift him up. Hammond, without looking around, without a word, supported on both sides, went unsteadily the few steps to the bar and had a drink.

Somebody said, "Something musta made that Pedro feller mad!" Another man said, "Yeah. He's got a sore toe an' Hammond musta stepped on it."

Bill Carson picked up his big new hat, brushed off the dust with his elbow and, looking up, saw Eddie Lowe leaning against the bar and looking at him with a grin on his round face that made him look like a gleeful and still impish small boy. Their eyes met for an instant only, then Carson turned to go out through the front door, saying to Buck Minor as he went, "Coming along, Buck?"

"Sure, Pedro, sure," said Buck, and followed.

Then, at the door, Bill Carson hung on his heel a moment. He was suddenly recalling some of Brew Hammond's words earlier in the evening, remembering how Hammond had spoken of Harry Morton, calling him a crook, and he remembered, too, what Steve Quinton had had to say.

He swung about on the impulse and said,

"Hammond, I always counted Harry Morton as a friend of mine. So you can figure that what I did to you tonight was the first installment from Harry!"

A strange look dawned on Brew Hammond's battered face. His lips moved for speech but no words came, and his mouth remained loosely open. There was no reading the look in his eyes.

Carson and Buck Minor went out, Eddie Lowe's shrewd,

amused eyes regarding them through his oversized spectacles as bright as a bird's.

Outside on the sidewalk Bill Carson said, "Look here, Buck, you've had a bellyful tonight, haven't you? Booze and gambling, both?"

"I was a damfool," said Buck Minor. "I always am a damfool when I hit the bottle. Just the same, Hammond's a louse."

"Better poke along to the hotel and go to bed. I've got a room there. See you in the morning."

Buck instantly grew suspicious. "Going back inside? Tying into Hammond again?"

"No. But I saw a man tonight I know; I want a couple of words with him. See you at breakfast time, Buck."

Buck took off his hat and felt his head. "I don't want no breakfast, kid," he said, and made a face. "I don't even want to talk about breakfast. Bed sounds sorta good though—Say, I owe you money—"

"Tomorrow, Buck. *Buenas noches, compañero.*"

Buck grunted and, still carrying his hat in his hand, cooling a fevered brow, headed toward the hotel. Carson made a cigarette and waited.

He had waited ten minutes or longer before Eddie Lowe joined him and was beginning to wonder why the delay. In the light streaming out through the Ace High door he saw that the look of lively and gratified amusement that had been on his friend's face was gone now, replaced by one of gravity, perhaps even of concern. Lowe was rolling an enormous, fat, black cigar in the corner of his mouth. He took off his spectacles, wiped them, pocketed them and said,

"Let's go somewhere where we can talk, Bill."

"Hotel. I've got a room."

There were few stragglers on the street, most idlers being in one or another of the several saloons. Here and there saddle horses drowsed patiently at the hitching rails, immobile save for a shake of the head now and then giving out the soft jingle of bridle chains, or for a shifting of weight from one leg to another. All was very quiet, very peaceful, even somnolent, on the main street of Las Nueces.

"A Christmas red apple never got a nicer polishing than you

gave Brewster Hammond," said Lowe. "What was the ruckus, Bill?"

Bill Carson explained briefly how it was really Buck Minor's fight but that Buck had been in no shape to take it. Lowe listened without a word and remained silent and thoughtful until they were in their room with the door closed. Carson tilted his chair back against the wall and hooked his thumbs in the armholes of his new cowhide vest; Lowe, still rolling his fat cigar, walked up and down. Now and then he'd stop in front of Carson to give emphasis to a remark; for the most time he fairly trotted from one end of the not over-large room to the other. His first coming to a dead halt was when he remarked crisply,

"Bill, you made a slip tonight. You played out of character."

Carson looked up at him, puzzled. Beyond what went with the look and an upcocking of his brows he asked nothing. Eddie Lowe nodded at him.

"Yep. You made one miscue; not knowing what the devil you are up to I don't know whether it might amount to anything or not. You noticed I kept you waiting a few minutes at the Ace High? Well, I'd caught a queer look on Hammond's face; I couldn't make out what it meant, but something had hit him all of a sudden like a ton of brick—No, I don't mean your slugging him. Something else, something that came over him all of a sudden. You had just gone out; he didn't know that I knew you; I went over to the bar and ordered a drink. And I kept watching him. I tell you it was hard to read that expression of his; I guess now because he was contending with more than one emotion all at once. The next thing, he brought his fist down on the bar; I heard him sort of grunt, 'By God!' He sat perfectly rigid a second or two, staring straight ahead, and you could tell he wasn't looking at anything. He said as though he were talking to himself, and he might have been at that, or to one of the men next to him, 'Pedro Morales? Like hell he is! He's no half-breed; he's a damned phony! Hiding behind those whiskers, slouching like a lizard, he —' And then he shut up like a clam. He seemed to come up out of a daze."

He resumed his walking. Bill Carson's frowning eyes followed him up and down.

"How the devil did he know?" Carson asked.

"Didn't I tell you you'd slipped up in your lines? Didn't I say

you'd stepped out of character? You make a pretty good scrub Injun, Bill, but—" Again he stopped. "Hammond must have thought of something that I noticed before he did; he was too busy and too mad to notice things. You, too; you were madder than a wet hen, kid. In your verbal argument before you settled down to fist work you forgot to talk like Pedro Morales, in broken English. Hammond must have noted it subconsciously; I happened to be watching him when the thing came clear."

"Hm," said Bill Carson.

"And I'll tell you one more thing: That look on the man's face, in his eyes mostly for his face was pretty much of a mess, was at last as clear as print. Bill, he looked just about scared to death!"

Bill Carson shrugged. "The thing is beyond me; it'll take some thinking out and some waiting, I suppose. And now tell me, old timer, what brings you into this neck of the woods, and where did you pick up that pinch of fluff, Lila Edwards, and how well do you know her. And say." He lowered his voice, though he was sure that Steve Quinton hadn't yet returned to the hotel. "You can hear through these walls like hollering down a rain barrel, and the room next door is taken."

"All right. I'm here on your fool account; as a business man you're a joke. And I felt like a holiday anyhow; was coming down with a cold when I left Los Angeles and it's gone now. I drove out to El Capitan Ranch, thinking I'd find you there; I'd have figured some excuse to get you off for a talk. I ran into Lila there —and don't set her down as a nitwit. She's part fox, part wildcat, part snake, part dynamite and part a clever, not-hard-to-look-at girl. I don't know her well at all; met her a couple of years ago at somebody's party in Hollywood; she was on vacation, it was just before she married old man Edwards for the money she thought he had. I guess he thought he had it, too! She wanted, of course, to be a movie star. At that, she might have got away with it except that she flopped in her screen tests; photographs like a mud fence. We came into Las Nueces, and here I found you."

"You're a good scout, Eddie. But what put it into your head that you could help me up here?"

"That was that cockeyed sort of deal you put over with Hammond for the Silver River Ranch, with Harry Morton as a go-

between.—By the way, I know Harry slightly; how well do you know him? Is he part crook, or on the level?"

A reminiscent smile softened the line of Carson's lips, or rather of as much of that line as was visible between mustache and beard.

"I've known Harry since we were kids. We ran away together to be African big game hunters. We did get as far as New Orleans. There was a circus in town and we got a job watering the elephants and a mangy old hippo; we cleaned out some of the animal cages, monkeys and what not—and it seemed like a warning to us, seeing how all the pesky critters had come from Africa —and we hadn't had much to eat and the damned smells turned our stomachs, and we said hell with Africa and everything that ever came out of it, and hightailed back to Texas. I've known Harry ever since, as well as before that; I know him as well as I do you. If he's a crook, you are another. That's flat, kid."

"Fair enough. But what is he for a business man? He told you he had forked over a fistful of money to Hammond for something or other, an option on the Silver River or as a first payment. He'd have secured some sort of receipt, wouldn't he?"

"Normally he would, of course. Maybe he did, I don't know. All I know is that while I was in the East he shot me a wire; it had to do mostly with his work down at my ranch where he was hellbent to bring in oil—and did. It made some mention of Silver River Ranch; just said, I think, that he had closed the deal with Hammond."

"Why do you say that normally he would have had things shipshape? Weren't things normal?"

"He had just one big idea in his head and that was Oil. The other thing is that Harry and Hammond had long been friends; they played on the same football team in High School. Harry would have trusted Hammond as I'd trust Harry." Carson shrugged. "I don't know; we didn't even mention the Silver River thing when I came back; he was too wildly excited and I was too damned disgusted over the mess he'd made of my ranch. One thing I remember; he said that he was going to see Hammond before striking out south, for Mexico City and then down into South America."

"How long did he plan to be away in the south?"

"I don't know. I don't think that he knew. He was mixing

business and pleasure; I fancy something like six months. Why?"

"Your friend didn't go to Mexico City at all, Bill."

"Didn't go to—how the hell do you know?"

"After you phoned I got to thinking about your fool set-up. So I got busy on it. Harry Morton, I knew, had had several deals with Benny Franks and Otto Schlessinger; they happen to be clients of mine—"

Bill Carson snorted. "Everybody I ever heard of in Southern California is a client of yours."

Eddie Lowe grinned. Then he went on, serious enough again, "I called up Franks and Schlessinger. Yes, they said, they knew that Harry had planned that trip. I asked where I'd find him in Mexico City; they told me right off. They have a branch firm there and Harry Morton knows the manager well, and further had some business with him and would positively see him. All I had to do was call Mexico City and ask for Cliff Huntley of the Mexican branch of Franks and Schlessinger. I phoned right away. Huntley hadn't seen or heard from Harry Morton. He even phoned the hotel where Morton stays when there. No Morton; no reservations in his name." He regarded his manhandled cigar with a look of loathing, dropped it into a convenient spittoon, unpocketed and mouthed another, and said bluntly, "Might be you made a mistake in your friend, Bill; it's been done before. Might be he needed some quick and easy money, grabbed your ten thousand and vamoosed for parts unknown. Anyhow it bears thinking over."

"No." Carson shook his head emphatically. "No, for a whole wagonful of reasons. Harry's not like that, to begin with; if he'd wanted money, all he'd have had to do was bone me for it and he knew he'd get it if I had it, and he knew I was flush right up to the hat brim; on top of that Harry was pretty flush himself. You see when he made me oily-rich he did rather well for himself. No, Eddie, that's out."

"Where'd he go then?"

"How do I know? Harry's an unpredictable cuss and with no strings holding him down; you never know what new irons he's got in what new fires. There may be a letter or a wire from him down in Texas at the ranch; I haven't bothered to have any mail sent up here. I'll do it in the morning, here to Las Nueces."

"You saw Hammond the other day, you told me. Did you happen to ask him whether Morton had been to see him lately?"

"No. We had only a few words. I was sort of stood on end by his blunt way of saying there wasn't any deal with Harry for the Silver River. He rode off and I let him go."

"You haven't told me, kid, what lies back of your going around in whiskers and Injun jargon, working for forty dollars a month breaking mustangs!"

Carson grinned. "I was fed up with oil and greasy money. I got to thinking of a clean ranch, like the Silver River which I figured was mine. I hit out on horseback because I was in no hurry, and a saddle felt good after so long a stay in the East. Then, when my horse went lame on me—"

And he sketched his first encounter with Tess Edwards. She, seeing him with a bundle on his back, unshaven and none too clean, tried to talk Spanish to him. Tess started it; he kept it up.

"No reason," he said.

Eddie Lowe chuckled. "I'm not so sure about that no reason business!" he said. "Not after having seen Tess! If I wasn't already married and the father of children, I'd go out and camp on that girl's trail myself! Good hunting, Bill!"

"Oh, dry up," said Bill Carson. "I want to think. This Morton-Hammond affair—By Glory!" he exclaimed. He recalled the half-heard conversation between Brewster Hammond and the man from Albuquerque. Steve Quinton had started to say something about Harry Morton—

He came up out of his chair and caught up the hat he had spun to the bed.

"I'll be back pretty pronto, Eddie. You better get to bed. I've just thought of something, and if anything comes of it I'll wake you when I come in."

But Eddie Lowe had ideas of his own. He glanced at his watch and put on his own hat.

"I'm starting back home," he said. "It's early and I'll make a couple of hundred miles anyhow before I turn in. If I want to get in touch with you I'll send you a wire here, to Las Nueces? To Bill Carson or Pedro Morales, which?"

"Oh, the beans are spilled now about the Pedro business, what with Hammond knowing; it was about played out anyhow. And it will feel good to get a shave and haircut again, and to talk the

queen's English as she is spoke down Texas way. Bill Carson to you, Attorney Lowe."

He watched Lowe streak out of town and then turned toward the Ace High. At first the street seemed absolutely deserted, the wooden sidewalks were still, undisturbed by any rocking boot-heels. Then he saw a man, just a dark figure, cut into the main thoroughfare from a side street or alley. The man was hurrying; he wore a gray hat that was almost white in the dim light; Carson thought that he kept twisting his head about as a man would do were he trying to watch behind him.

The man was on the same side of the street as was Bill Carson. He must have seen Carson or heard his tread; he came to a dead halt, stood a minute, then stepped down into the road, crossed to the other sidewalk and came along. He had pulled his hat brim down as though to hide his face. But Carson knew him for the man he was hoping to find at the gambling place, Steve Quinton. He knew Quinton's shady reputation, he had no doubt that the man was as crooked as a dog's hind leg, he was of a mind to try bribing him. It was his judgment that Steve Quinton would barter any secret, sell out anybody, if the stakes were high enough. He had something on Hammond; it might or might not have to do with the aborted deal for Silver River; Carson would take a chance and pay for what knowledge he could come by. And it was a fortunate thing, he thought, that he found Quinton alone. He in turn stepped down into the road to cross to a meeting with the furtive, skulking figure.

He was within a dozen paces of Steve Quinton who, seeing him, seemed uncertain whether to hurry along or stop, when the snarling report of a rifle broke the silence like a hammer shattering a sheet of glass. Now Quinton did stop; he stood rigid and seemed hesitant, queerly and unstably balanced. The second shot came before the snarl of the first had quite died on shocked eardrums, and Steve Quinton executed a spasmodic half turn, jerked out his arms wildly and crashed to the sidewalk. Not a sound out of him, not another spasm after he fell.

Carson saw the orange-yellow flash; the shot came from the mouth of the side street along which a couple of minutes ago Steve Quinton had come. And then came another flash and the third shot, and Bill Carson's new hat was carried off his head,

and with the fourth shot, Carson's shoulder was nicked, his left shoulder and no more than a scratch. When the fifth rifle shot came there was no Bill Carson standing there to afford any man a target. He leaped back and in through the hotel door, raced down the hallway, poured himself out through a back door and, ducking among cords of wood and heaps of broken crates and odds and ends of lumber and piles of tin cans, sped along the rear of the adjacent buildings, headed for the alley harboring the rifleman. It would be a thundering great joy to take that gentleman from the rear.

He found the alley deserted; well he had hoped for rather more than he had expected. He stepped out onto the sidewalk, saw no one, just the still, dark form like a black shadow, blacker than the semi-dark, where Quinton sprawled.

He went back to Quinton.

Steve Quinton was dead. There was not a doubt, from the first look at him. He had been shot twice; the first bullet had torn into the middle of his back; before he had fallen, the next had drilled him through the head. No more blackmailing, no bribing for the man from Albuquerque.

"Brew Hammond's work!" grunted Bill Carson, and felt sure of it.

Carson started almost at a run toward the Ace High. He wanted to find out whether Hammond were there or absent and unaccounted for. And almost at a run, men hurrying from the Ace High, men who had heard the shots, who had listened a moment, looking into each other's speculative eyes, awaiting return shots or a cry or—silence. With the silence shut down, unruffled, sinister with its implication, they burst out through the wide swing-doors and saw, first of all, Bill Carson hurrying toward them.

He broke his swift pace down to a moderate walk.

"What's up?" a voice called. "What's all the shootin'?"

They kept coming on; there were stragglers coming on behind them. Carson answered, "There's a man across the street from the hotel, shot to death. Somebody cracked down on him with a rifle, somebody standing at the corner right there where the alley is."

The growing crowd pushed on to where Quinton's body sprawled; Bill Carson peered at face after face, looking for Brewster Hammond as he walked on toward the Ace High.

Somebody called sharply to him,

"Hey there, you! Where are you goin' in such a hurry?"

Carson paid the man no attention but hurried on. The voice that had challenged him shouted out louder and presently other voices joined in:

"He might be the man that did the shootin'! We couldn't tell in there whether it was a rifle or six-gun! He's in a hell of a hurry cleanin' out! Hold him!"

Men were still pouring out of the Ace High. Carson came to a halt, ready now to turn back with the others, for he saw Brew Hammond coming out of the saloon with the more laggardly of the crowd. Well? Hammond might have been in the Ace High all the time. There had been time though, if a man hurried, for him to run from the alley and around to the back door of the saloon and mingle with this crowd.

Men stood in a ring looking down at Steve Quinton's body. Someone identified him: "Yep, it's Steve Quinton all right. He come up here this mornin'. You know, Steve Quinton that runs a shake-down joint in Albuquerque. Dead as a stuck hawg."

Brew Hammond shouldered to the front.

"Why, it's Steve Quinton!" he exclaimed. "Somebody's butchered poor little old Steve Quinton." Down on one knee he looked up; for the first time he seemed to see Bill Carson. His finger shot out to point accusingly. "It would be like this half-breed's work, to shoot or knife a man in the back! Watch him, boys! He and Quinton knew each other; I saw them talking together; they were half quarreling then."

Hammond leapt to his feet and whipped out his belt gun. Men bristled around Bill Carson.

Carson got his back to the wall with one long stride, shoving men right and left, and his swift hands going up under his cowhide vest filled themselves with two guns to Hammond's one. And Carson said with an edge to his voice that was as menacing as the edge of a knife blade,

"I told you boys it was a rifle that did for him. You'll find rifle bullets in him or, if they plowed on through, in a wall along here somewhere. Here's one more thing: I've got two guns on me; neither has been fired. I'll let a couple of you boys look at them, one gun after the other. Then check on Brew Hammond, find out

if he ducked out of the Ace High for a few minutes, find out if he had a rifle handy—find out where his rifle is now, *and if it's been fired four times!"*

"Why, damn you!" shouted Hammond.

A long, rangy, sandy-haired cattle man, Chuck Raine of the Smoking Springs outfit, said mildly, "That's fair enough boys. Here, Needles, let's you an' me look at the kid's hardware."

Bill Carson, retaining one gun in his right hand, gave the other into Chuck Raine's custody. Chuck, with Needles at his shoulder, broke the gun, spun the cylinder, smelled it, noted all chambers full, no empties. He asked for a white handkerchief; one man in the crowd had one that was at least originally white, a sort of grayish white now. Chuck Raine made a twist of one corner, put it down the gun barrel, twisted it some more and thereafter examined it by the light of a match; he smelled it too.

He gave the gun back to its owner and examined the other weapon similarly. Then, with Needles and some three of the other men, those nearest him, bearing him out in his findings, he said,

"Both these guns are full loaded. Neither has been shot lately; they're plumb clean."

Bill Carson holstered his guns. He and Brewster Hammond stood looking at each other. There was a silence. Then Bill Carson pulled off his hat and spun it into Chuck Raine's lean, leathery hands.

"Look that over," he invited.

The hat passed from hand to hand. At least a dozen fingers were poked into the holes through the crown.

"You can look at this, while you're at it," said Carson.

He struck a match and held it up to his left shoulder. He tore the sleeve for them to see better; a long shallow gash from which slow drops of blood were still oozing.

Again he and Hammond looked at each other.

CHAPTER IX

Buck Minor awoke with the sun streaming in through his hotel window. Lying on his back, he regarded the fly-specked ceiling with a jaundiced eye. He screwed up his face and moved his head

gently from side to side, being very careful with it, and finally rose. There were pitcher and basin on his washstand; he doused head and face, neck and hands, with cold water. He combed his hair with his fingers, and having set his hat in place, careful with that, too, setting it on gently, stood ready to fare forth since, not having removed a stitch of clothes, not even his boots, it wasn't necessary to put them on.

"Coffee," said Buck Minor, going downstairs, "is one hell of a fine invention. The man that figgered out what coffee beans was good for oughta've had his name printed in gold letters alongside Kit Carson's and George Washington's and Sam Houston's."

So he went to the corner lunch counter. A man sat at the counter giving his full attention to a big platter in front of him well garnished with ham and eggs and fried potatoes and flanked by a cup of coffee on one side and a sort of leaning tower of flapjacks on the other. This man Buck Minor took to be his companion of the night before, the half-breed Pedro Morales. Buck Minor, spurring himself into what went for a playful mood, tilted this gentleman's hat forward over his eyes so that it rested on the bridge of his nose, and sat down on the next stool. The man with the ham and eggs shoved his hat back, whirled about and said,

"What the—"

Buck Minor goggled at him.

"Oh, my gosh!" he stammered. "I thought you was—" He broke short off, stared and blinked and stared again. He pulled his hat off and plowed through his hair with his horny fingers, as though a heroic massage of the scalp might stimulate the brain beneath.

Bill Carson gave him back a steady stare out of humorless eyes. Already this morning he had been to the barber. His hair was shortened by inches, and there never was a man with a closer, cleaner shave; as a matter of fact, when he had first looked into the glass after the thing was done it was like looking into the face of an old friend not seen in a long while. Most of the tan had been bleached out of him by the sheltering black beard so that he came pretty close to looking like a city paleface. And he had ridded himself of his cowhide vest and most of his borderline finery, being clothed now, he assured himself, in his right mind and such outer trappings as became a southwestern rancher.

So he knew well enough what troubled Buck Minor. Buck, from the rear, had been sure that this was Pedro Morales, then he had been equally sure that it wasn't—and there he bogged down into a quicksand of uncertainty between the two discarded certainties. He was simply damned if he knew whether it was or whether it wasn't—and he had for the first time in his life of many a wild jamboree the fear that perhaps the prohibitionists with their wild accusations of John Barleycorn, knew whereof they spoke. Last night he had been all right—this morning he was bemused.

The man who *might* be Pedro Morales, and who *might* be somebody else, kept on looking him straight in the eye as he remarked coldly—and for the occasion Bill Carson threw his voice into the lowest possible register—

"Is it a habit with you to go around knocking people's hats off before breakfast, may I ask? Is it perhaps even a custom in your quaint little city of Las Nueces?"

"I thought you was somebody—"

Again Buck Minor broke off short. He wasn't sure yet. Was it Pedro Morales or was it a stranger who happened to look like Pedro, a good deal like Pedro? Pedro had had on a fancy vest last night; this man didn't. Pedro had worn his guns in shoulder holsters; this man's weapons were worn honestly in full sight where guns belonged. Pedro had had a brand new hat; this fellow's hat looked a trifle battered and there were a couple of holes through its crown. Then there was the matter of speech: Pedro spoke like an unlettered breed, this man seemed to have a lot of words ready to use, right on tap, and talked more like a Texan who had gone to school than anything else Buck Minor could call to mind.

He gave over scratching his head and demanded a cup of coffee. "And make it strong and black and hot. That's the way I want it." He regarded the man who was elbow to elbow with him in a long, penetrating stare. "Look here," he said, "who the hell are you anyhow? My eyes sort of bother me this morning; they fed me some bum licker last night that would make a mule cross-eyed. Maybe after I get my coffee— Aw hell, Pedro, if you're just Pedro with a shave and a hair cut, say so."

Bill Carson answered him truthfully and at length. "Stranger, I most certainly and positively am not your friend Pedro What's-his-name. I don't know any such man. I never expect to. Now

you might tell me, although I am not given by nature nor yet by habitude to prying into the innermost recesses of another man's affairs, are *you* sure that there is such an individual as this Pedro person? Might it not be that, due to the hard liquor of which you speak, that this Pedro is simply a figment of the imagination, and thus that—"

"Oh, hell," said Buck, and rested his head between his hands. "You ain't him."

His coffee came and he drank it, hot; the steam from the brimming cup curled up around his face like cigarette smoke. He drew a deep breath, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and ordered breakfast; ham and eggs and fried potatoes and flapjacks, and more coffee. He'd take the coffe while the rest was coming up.

Bill Carson finished his breakfast. Then he bought a pack of tailor made cigarettes which he put into his pocket, and a big fat cigar reminiscent of Eddie Lowe's, which he put into his mouth. That settled it for Buck Minor. He gave over speculation, dismissed the whole question of Pedro Morales versus Somebody Else from his mind and went to work on his second cup of coffee.

He felt better, very much better. He got his shoulders back and his head up; enjoying, really enjoying a morning smoke, he stepped out onto the sidewalk. The stranger was there, idling with his back to the sunny wall.

"Hello, Buck," he said casually. "Suppose we go somewhere and squat and have a war talk."

He had thrown his cigar away and was smoking a Durham and wheat-straw cigarette. Buck regarded him balefully. At last he said with a sniff,

"You ain't Pedro exac'ly and you ain't no stranger. You're something that Pedro changed into overnight, or Pedro was something you changed into a while back, before I knowed you. So let's go squat and chin."

They walked to the end of the street where the livery stable was; they went into the dim old barn, located their horses, looked them over and then went out to the corral where they sat on the top rail in the early sun.

"You're out of a job, Buck," said Bill Carson. He opened his knife, sliced a long sliver off the rail, hunched over and started whittling. "What are you going to do for yourself?"

"Who in thunder are you anyhow?"

"My name's Bill. I'm not sure about the last name until I get things thought out a little better."

"Fair enough," conceded Buck Minor who in general was a fair man. He unpocketed his knife and carved himself a piece of wood to work on. "You sure licked the pants off Brew Hammond," he said. "By the way you took him apart I might have knowed as you wasn't any half Injun. Just the same," and he shook his head gently, "when you put your mind to it, what with them black whiskers and all, you sure made a bang up half-breed, Bill." He sliced off a nice long, thin, clean, even shaving, and was proud of his steady hand. He said, "Sure, I'm out of a job. I've been that away before. There's a feller in town, or was last night, name of Chuck Raine; he owns the Smoking Spring's outfit. Most likely I can tie in with Chuck."

"Want to work for me, Buck?"

Buck didn't even look up; he kept on whittling and created a lovely thin ribbon of white pine that curled up like the tendril of a girl's hair. He cocked his head to the side and looked at his handiwork appraisingly and with satisfaction. He might have asked questions; most men would. He might have demanded what sort of work, where, how much. When he got around to answering he simply said,

"Sure."

"Fine. You're on the payroll," said Bill Carson.

"I owe you some money from last night," said Buck Minor. "The fifty you staked me to and half what I won."

He reached into his pocket.

"Keep it; call it your first month's pay, in advance." Buck nodded, withdrew his hand empty and returned to his woodwork.

"How long have you worked for the Edwards folks, Buck?"

"Ever since they took over El Capitan. That's going on six months now."

"You told me that Tess Edwards fired you. Why?"

Buck broke his stick in two, threw it away and pocketed his knife. Before he could answer, Carson shot another question at him:

"What sort of a girl do you make her out to be anyhow?"

"She's aces, that girl. They don't make 'em classier. But—"

"Yesterday you said you had no use for the crowd of them!"

"I was mad clear through. She made me mad, the way she tied a tin can to my tail. She—"

"All right. Now, why did she can you?"

"I was up at the Silver River Ranch. I'd been up there three-four times before, poking around without putting a piece in the paper about it, knowing there was something rotten going on. This time I run into Brew Hammond. I was sure raising hell with that hombre in words maybe you don't hear in church, but good enough words at that, and ones a kid six years old could understand. Then Miss Tess rode up; she was square on top of us before I knowed it. She—well, she didn't like much the things I was saying. I was mad then, to begin with; she called me down so I felt like a jack-rabbit a truck had run over. One thing led to another in some pretty fast come-backs, and she got so mad she went white, and you could have lit a cigarette at her eyes, and she told me to get the hell off her ranch and stay off. Which I went and done."

"You whiffed a taint of corruption in the air—"

"What I said was that I smelled something rotten. And you don't talk much like the Injun Pete Morales I used to know!"

"Brew Hammond at work, huh? Let's have it, Buck."

"It's a nice easy way to make wages, squatting on a fence and jabbering!"

"Go 'head. Jabber. Unload about Hammond and let's hear where Tess Edwards comes in."

"You're the boss, Bill. Like I says, I've been on El Capitan around six months; a feller finds out a few things in that long a time. First off the bat, and maybe you know it and maybe don't, El Capitan belongs to the Edwards girl."

No, Carson didn't know. He said quickly, "The Edwards girl? Which one, wife or daughter?"

"Tess Edwards. It was her old man's, of course. That wife of his, humph. Seems as though she trapped the old boy when he was sort of sick and off guard and I'd say took down bad with an eppydemic of being feeble-minded with a fever, and what she'd done was sock the spurs to him to grab his money. Well, for one thing, his money'd run out pretty damn thin on him, thinner than even Edwards himself guessed. And he didn't get well as soon's he'd figgered on. And, being no fool, his eyes come unstuck. In a fat hurry he deeded over the El Capitan spread with every hoof,

horn and tail on it to Miss Tess. Which, it seems as though, made his cutie, Mrs. Lila, chaw tacks and jitter around like a grasshopper in a hot skillet."

"You haven't any use for Edwards either, have you?"

"The old man's all right," grunted Buck Minor. "Oh, I know what I said yesterday, but I tell you I was mad. What little I've seen of him, he's all right."

"Now for Hammond."

"You see, it's like this, Bill, as you being a Johnny-come-lately mightn't know. Still you might; I'm damned if I know how much you've got figgered out already."

"Shoot the works, Buck. You can figure that I don't know anything, that I'm just wising up and that you're coaching me. Go 'head."

"Well, like I says, it's this-a-way: Tess Edwards owns El Capitan, and Brewster Hammond owns the Silver River, or anyhow did until he made a deal with her for the whole shooting-works, land, water and stock. Now let's see. You know the lay of the land out that way, how El Capitan Ranch and the Silver River Ranch stretch out 'longside one another for miles, and how the border line hangs pretty close to the line of the Blue Smoky Hills, and how the Silver River Ranch is, take it all-in-all, mostly three-four hundred feet higher up. You know how the Hammond place is the best watered place in a hundred miles from anywhere, what with the little lakes and what with the river itself that runs out in the lower hills on the near edge of the desert country. Likewise, El Capitan has always been one of the finest spreads a man ever clapped eyes on. Well, lately El Capitan ain't been so good. Since I been there, Buck, I've saw its water running low, its springs drying up until lately it's got so there ain't no water to spare. There won't be as much, come next week, as there is now. And that's why Tess Edwards, seeing what was in the cards, steps out and buys the Silver River Ranch, going I reckon out on the end of a limb to buy it, too, mortgaging what she's already got to save her bacon by getting water the only place it's to be had. Got all that, kid?"

"Got it," the new employer said curtly to his new hired hand. "But you can't blame Hammond for that."

"The hell I can't! Let most anything bad happen around here and I'm blaming him for it before I look around anywheres else!

He's stealing the water, Bill; he's forced the girl into buying him out when I guess, from what I hear here and there, he was pretty much as far out on a limb as she is right now. Take this drying-up business of El Capitan. It started in about three months ago. Up to one day there was plenty water, springs and creeks running strong. Nex' day the springs had almost stopped flowing, the creeks was starting to shrink up and shrivel up and turn into trickles. Any fool, specially if he'd knowed what El Capitan had always been like, would have took notice, wouldn't he, Bill?"

"So you, being foreman, being Buck Minor to boot, took notice."

"I sure did. I wasted a hell of a lot of time hanging around them springs and the headwaters of them creeks, watching for the water to come booming back. Nary a boom, just the water getting less and less. And then I got me my hunch. The day before the springs started to go dry, Bill, I'd heard what sounded like great guns going off, up on the Silver River Ranch. At first I had thought it was thunder off in the mountains, rolling over the cliffs, booming in the canyons. But it wasn't thunder. Blasting, that's what it was, blasting like all Billy-be-damned and hell-cut-loose. Blasting like truck loads of giant powder going off all at once, way up at the upper end of the Silver River! Me, remembering that noise, I forked a horse and did me some riding.

"Well, Brew Hammond was blasting all right. He had a dozen men working on the job, and once in a while they'd shoot off another charge of powder or dynamite or whatever. I wonders what in hell he's doing. He comes over and talks, friendly and good-natured. I asks what he thinks he's doing. He tells me and sort of shows me: He's getting ready to build him a big dam across a canyon and back the water up a mile or so, and have him plenty of water. That's the way he says it, Bill—plenty of water! Now I ask you, why? Why, when he's already got more water running free than he can ever find any earthly use for!"

"What's the answer, Buck?" Carson scarcely needed to ask.

"I said already how the Silver River is a good deal higher up than El Capitan. Must be that all the water on El Capitan, springs and little bitsy creeks, comes down underground, drainage-like, under the Blue Smoky Hills, from the Silver River Ranch. Must be that Brew Hammond knowed all about that or else figgered it out; that all he had to do was bust up the drains, the cracks in

the rocks or whatever, that let the water soak through, and it was like plugging up a pipe. So he gets a lot more water he can't use, and El Capitan loses a lot it can't stagger along without. And so Tess Edwards has to go buy the whole damn Silver River Ranch spread just to get its water which later on it will cost her a hell of a lot of money—which she ain't got—to put back on El Capitan."

Bill Carson sought to think straight, to be fair and open minded.

"Hammond might have done that innocently."

"Hammond couldn't do anything innocent. He's a crooked gambler, Bill, and you know what that is. Most folks don't know him for a gambler, but that's what he is on a big scale. He owns the Ace High; most folks don't know that, either. The Ace has made him a whale of a lot of money; and it's lost him a whale of a lot, too. Some city fellers blew in here a while back; there was four of 'em; they were slick and they had money. Hammond come nigh on to losing his shirt to them. I figger he's hard-run right now; I figger he'd do any dirty trick for a few thousand dollars."

"I wonder!" Carson recalled his own repudiated deal with Brewster Hammond. He remembered Steve Quinton's words in the hotel room. Well, Quinton was dead now.

He thought of Harry Morton.

He pulled off his hat and regarded the holes in it.

"Ever hear of Harry Morton, Buck?" he asked. And, when Buck shook his head, "Of Steve Quinton?"

"Don't know any Steve Quinton. Seems like I've heard his name; can't place him off hand though. Maybe when you get through telling me about him and Morton you'll tell me how come your new Stetson got ruinated. Looks sorta like it might have run up against a bullet. Last night when I was sleeping the sleep of the just, as the feller says."

Carson told him briefly who Quinton was, what had happened to him, how one bullet had drilled his hat and another had furrowed his arm.

"Hammond?" demanded Buck Minor sharply.

"I don't know."

"If you was betting, which way would you bet? Hammond?"

"You and I would both bet the same way, Buck. Now tell me

something: How often do you go out on a tear like last night's? Trying to drink all the booze in town and speaking your mind as you damn well please, like a free man in a free country?"

"That's my first little party in six months," said Buck carelessly. Then his eyes hardened and the muscles about his mouth tightened. "If it's any of your damn business, Mr. Bill Somebody-or-other!"

The eyes which met his were as steely, as steady as his own.

"If you're taking a job with me I'm making it my business," said Bill Carson.

Buck Minor slid down from the corral. He dug out his money; he separated fifty dollars from the rest, then cut the remainder in half. The fifty and another sixty dollars he handed to the man who had been his employer for five or ten minutes. Bill Carson accepted it and pocketed it. Buck turned on his heel and went back uptown, headed in the general direction of the Ace High.

"I don't blame him at that," Carson told himself. "Sorry, though. I've got a hunch I could use a man like Buck Minor."

He watched the man out of sight around a corner, then walked swiftly over to the stable, called for his horse, saddled and rode back to the hotel. He went in, paid his bill, toed into the stirrup again and rode out of town, headed toward El Capitan.

Buck Minor walked on his heels. Dammit, he ought to've knocked that Bill individual clean off the fence. If this Bill individual or anybody else on God's good green earth thought that he could measure out Buck Minor's liquor and fun for him, could tell him where to head in at any time, any place, that party had another think coming.

Buck Minor grew angrier at every step. all the angrier because he had felt himself warming to this really unknown gent, liking the cuss more than you like most fellers even when you've knowed 'em a lifetime.

"He's a louse," grunted Buck Minor.

And he thought of the man he had named with that, to him, name-of-names last night. He had been far from sober yet he had known what he was about; he was just letting himself go, that was all, his alcohol having merely spurred him along a bit. He remembered every bit of it; how Bill had stood up for him, how Bill had

tied into Brew Hammond, how Bill had put up the sort of fight to make you proud of him. Bill had staked him, too. . . .

He walked more and more slowly. He looked back over his shoulder, but he had already turned the corner and couldn't see anything but a fairly empty street.

He stopped and did a bit of downright sober thinking. There was this Bill individual—and Brew Hammond—and something on the fire. Bill, with some sort of interest in the whole set-up, and certainly not on Hammond's side. Bill, who had damn near killed Brew Hammond and had taken a shot through the hat from Hammond and a gouge in the arm—

Walking even more slowly, head down and pondering and muttering under his breath, Buck Minor retraced his steps, lagging more and more, to the corner. He saw the corral; nobody there. He looked the other way and saw Bill come out of the hotel, go up into the saddle and head out of town.

"Hi, Bill!" he yelled.

Bill Carson didn't hear him; he rode out of sight.

Buck Minor hurried then, his mind made up. He went for his own horse, got saddle and bridle on with a rush and rode on his spurs to overtake the man with whom he knew doggone well he was going to work.

"Hi, Bill!" he called the second time.

Bill Carson, only a couple of miles out of town, turned in the saddle, saw who was following, and waited.

"Got to thinking, Bill," said Buck Minor. "I need some stuff. I could use that money I give you back."

Carson dug it out of his pocket and handed it over.

"Sure, Buck," he said. Not a muscle twitched in either man's face. Already they were by way of understanding each other, these two. "Ride along part way with me, Buck, and we'll finish what we've got to say."

"Sure, Bill." Gravely Buck pocketed the money again. Gravely he said, "Brew Hammond's a louse."

"Sure, Buck," said Bill Carson.

Then he laughed. Buck Minor grinned, then the two laughed together.

CHAPTER X

BILL CARSON rode alone to El Capitan Ranch that morning, a Bill Carson who had come out from the underbrush at least to the extent of no longer being Pedro Morales. Just who he was to become next he had not altogether decided. He was thinking of Brewster Hammond and of some still unfinished business between Hammond and himself. By now Hammond knew he wasn't any Pedro Morales, but he couldn't very well know him for Bill Carson. And with that unfinished business in mind, Carson couldn't see that it would be to his advantage to announce himself, whereas, it might just possibly pay to keep the man guessing on that point. He hadn't even told Buck Minor. "Just Bill," was all that he had said.

Buck, by the way, he had despatched on an errand of sorts. Carson hadn't troubled himself much about the horse he had abandoned the day Tess Edwards had honked him out of her way on the mountain road; the animal had food and water in plenty, and a few days rest should have taken care of the strained muscle. But if by any chance the horse still lingered on in its new, rich grazing land—it was a good horse or Bill Carson wouldn't have selected it for his long ride—it might just as well be picked up again. Then there were the saddle, bridle and spurs he had hidden one place and another in the brush; Buck would get them, carry them into Las Nueces and thereafter meet Carson at the spot they had appointed.

As the rugged hills bordering the nearer side of El Capitan Ranch lifted into his vision he bethought him again of what name he would wear to go along with Bill. Some twenty-six years previously he had been christened William Gaunt Carson; his mother's folks had been Gaunts, English a couple of hundred years before, then the Gaunts of Virginia, later of Texas. Well, nothing wrong with Gaunt.

It was late forenoon when he came in sight of the ranch house and barns and outbuildings; he had tarried for a good long talk with his new retainer, had jogged along in leisurely fashion there-

after and it was within an hour of midday when he unsaddled and led his horse to water and into the barn. The place seemed deserted at first; then through the grove of cottonwoods between barn and the house, he saw Mr. Edwards in his chair on the veranda, smoking his cigar that was as long and lean as Eddie Lowe's was short and fat.

Bill Carson gave a jerk to his neck scarf and strode up the knoll to the house. He wondered whether Tess and Lila were in, or either one of them. It would suit him just as well to have a bit of a chat alone with Edwards.

Edwards was watching him come on with a greater interest than Bill Carson could know about; at first there was a gleam of humor in his eyes, and a slight twitch of his lips, but these outward signals of an inner state were banished before they were seen.

Carson's hat was pulled forward, his head was down until he came to the steps. Then abruptly he lifted his head and shoved his hat back. Up shot Mr. Edwards' brows as though they were strung on a spring which had suddenly been released. He stared a moment, then laughed softly.

"Exit Pete Morales, enter Mr. Bill Carson," he chuckled. "Squat, Bill, and shoot the works."

Bill Carson squatted, which is to say he drew the old bench away from its place against the wall by the door, hauled it forward and disposed his long, lean form on it.

"If you don't mind, Mr. Edwards," he said in a voice not over-loud, "the whole of me hasn't showed up yet. Sort of coming out by inches, that's what I seem to be doing. Full name, Bill Gaunt Carson. Just using a part of it at the time; how about Bill Gaunt for a name?"

"You're a funny guy, Bill. What in blazes are you up to, anyhow? Thievery, espionage—or just simple murder?"

"Look here, Mr. Edwards—"

"Want me to call you *Mr.* Car— Pardon! Shall I call you *Mr.* Gaunt?"

"I get you. Thanks. But look here, Edwards, I—"

"Full name Edward Enright Edwards. Friends—I used to have some friends—call me Ted for short. Hell's bells and turpentine! Am I so damned old and useless and respectable that folks have got to go around Mistering me?"

"Doggone it, Ted, let me make my speech before somebody—"

"Nobody is going to erupt into our tête-à-tête, Bill Gaunt—darned good name for you at that; you sort of look the part this morning—take your time. Tess is off somewhere. Lila complains of a nasty headache and is resting in her room. Just me and the cook are on the prowl, and I hear pots and pans in the kitchen."

"Fine," said Bill Gaunt. "And now I guess I owe you something of an explanation. You see—"

"You don't owe me a damn thing, Bill Gaunt; get that into your head! If a man wants to duck out from under things once or so, in a lifetime—well, I've done it in my time. I know a good deal about you, of course. I can read print like nobody's business. I take a lot of papers, New York, Boston, Los Angeles and so on. I've read a good deal about you in the western papers, about your oil wells down in Texas and all that. I've kept my mouth shut, as you asked me to do; if you had known me better you wouldn't even have asked."

"Thanks, Ted, old timer," said Bill Gaunt, and, reminiscent of the late Pedro Morales, there came the flash of that white-toothed smile of his. "Just the same I'll tell you a thing or two. I couldn't stick my ranch down in Texas, the way it smelled to high heaven with oil. I bought me some dry lands down on the edge of the desert; I thought I'd have the fun of putting water on 'em and building me something fine. The old thing of making the desert bloom like the rose, you know; what Brigham Young did to Salt Lake, what the boys later did to the Imperial Valley. I headed up this way meaning to get control of all the water on the Silver River Ranch."

"Ah! Brewster Hammond's place! And Tess snagged it out from under you!" Edwards indulged in his chuckle again.

"I'll tell you what your daughter Tess did do to me—and made me mad as a hornet for a spell! It was the day I came up here. My horse had gone lame on me; I turned him loose, shouldered my bundle and rode shank's mare. It was hotter'n the hot place and twice as dusty, and I don't like walking anyhow. So when I heard a car coming upgrade after me I was a mighty glad man. Glad for two seconds. That girl of yours gave me the horn, damn near ran me down, and shot by like a comet."

Edwards' chuckle shook his whole body.

"Do you blame the kid," he laughed. "Remember what you

must have looked like! And with all the tales she's heard about a poor defenseless woman picking up an escaped convict, and all that!"

"I didn't think along those lines just then, with another dozen or so miles to make, walking on blisters! But around the next bend I came up with her; her gas buggy had stalled. I got my innings then and don't you forget it!"

"I'll bet she won't! Sail on, Mr. Gaunt!"

"She tried to talk to me in Spanish. Yes, I began then to realize what I looked like; she was dead sure I was the lowest bred of all border breeds. Well, because she had to, she gave me a lift; I wouldn't start her car until she promised that, promised on top of it to pay me a dollar, and on top of that to give me a job here at El Capitan. That's how come, Mr. Edwards, to you! I wasn't in any hurry about anything, except to get away from that damned oil, and I never was much good anyhow at resisting temptation."

Edwards' mood changed. He said crisply,

"Figured on doing business with Hammond, eh? How well do you know him?"

"Not at all. I've seen him a time or two—"

"How come you beat hell out of him down in Las Nueces last night?"

Bill Gaunt stared. "There's an old saying that 'News do travel!' It was—" He grinned broadly. "Shucks, Ted, you're all wrong. I heard that Hammond did mix with somebody in Las Nueces but it was that feller Pete Morales!"

"So I heard," said Edwards drily. "One of our boys here told me early this morning; Jimmy Cotton it was. He had met up with a puncher of Chuck Raine's who runs the Smoking Springs Ranch that touches on our southwest border; the puncher had been in town and seen the fracas. Hammond know who you are, Bill?"

"I don't think so. He has tumbled to the fact that I'm no Pedro Morales, but I don't believe he knows anything beyond that."

"And you're not telling him in a hurry?"

"Why should I? I don't know yet what I am going to do. I haven't had time to think it out."

"I take it you haven't much use for Hammond? Especially after last night!"

Bill Gaunt shook his head. "Just a scrap with him wouldn't

make any difference. But, well, no; I haven't any use whatever for him, Edwards."

"Me, too, kid. I think the man's a confounded rascal. And I have thought so right along."

"He's worse than that. Ted. The hell of a lot worse. Better watch your spoons when he comes to dinner. Somebody murdered a man named Quinton in Las Nueces late last night. I'd bet my right arm that it was Brew Hammond who shot him in the back. Not that maybe Quinton didn't have it coming to him; not that I ever can hope to prove it was Hammond; not that I'm even dead sure myself. Yet my bet still stands, a right arm against the hole in a doughnut."

"Hm. As bad as that, Bill? And, dammit, that girl of mine seems all of a sudden to have taken a liking for the fellow! And if I told her to lay off— Whew!"

"I know; anyhow I can guess. Just the same I hear from Buck Minor that your daughter is doing business with Hammond over the Silver River and it won't hurt any if you sort of nose in on details. There are a lot of things I don't know about the man, Ted, but there's one thing I do know: whether he'd kill a man to get out of a jam, he wouldn't have to think twice about cheating a man out of ten thousand dollars nor of branding as a crook a fellow who is as fair, square and aboveboard as anybody you ever knew. You might stuff all that in your pipe and smoke on it."

He stood up to go.

"Squat," snapped Edwards. "Dammit, you're in no such hurry that you've got to rush off like this. You eat sometimes, don't you? Hang around and have dinner; it'll be ready pretty pronto."

"If you're alone—"

"Can't tell. I expect Tess back any minute; Lila may come to table or may not. What's the odds? You'll have to face 'em sooner or later, won't you?" He chuckled once more. "I'd sort of like to be in on it!"

And Tess did put in a swift appearance, even while they were speaking of her. She came like a spring breeze, running up the steps, gay in a form-fitting riding rig that announced to the world that she was as sweetly shaped a young baggage as ever filled a man's warming eye, whipping off her gauntlets as she landed on the topmost step almost at a bound, her hat knocked pretty much over one ear, her hair all about her glowingly flushed face, her

eyes throwing forth sparkles such as are seen in some of the gentler, lovelier pyrotechnic displays. She seemed as happy as a whole flock of larks, as bright and headlong as a handful of bright-colored autumn leaves flung along the irresponsible pathway of a pirouetting whirlwind.

She scarcely noticed the man sitting on the bench. She darted upon her father, gave him a daughterly kiss nicely placed in the middle of his forehead and, obviously adance within a mercuric spirit just as she was so close to being tiptoe on her restless, neatly booted feet, exclaimed almost breathlessly and in high delight,

"Oh, Dad! If only you could have seen what I have just looked upon! You'd whoop for joy! I know you would! Nothing else but the oh-so-handsome face of our good neighbor and friend, Mr. Brewster Hammond! It has been most beautifully pushed around, from east to west, you'd say, and likewise from north to south. *One eye is shut tight and is the color of an antiquated piece of liver!* Somebody, most paternal and respected sir, has beat him up—well, as you would so eloquently put it, from hell to breakfast! *Wheee!"*

Mr. Edward Enright Edwards tucked in the corners of his mouth and strove to look grave. He said in a voice undisturbed by any smothered chuckle.

"Tess, my dear, we have company. An old friend of mine. Mr. William Gaunt, who—"

Tess spared Bill Gaunt only a fleeting glance. She took time, though she hurried it a bit, for a quick "Howdy do," and a casual handshake. She even said, "You'll pardon me, Mr. Gaunt? I know how interested my father is in my news," and turned again to Edwards.

"Why don't you leap up and cheer?" she demanded.

"Confound it," said Edwards. "I thought you liked this fellow Hammond." Tess made a face and said something like "Puh!" An explosive Puh.

"And so someone worked him over, eh?" said Edwards. "Happen to know who saved you and me the trouble, youngster?"

"No." She giggled delightfully. Whipping her breeches with her riding gloves, getting her hat off and her hair fluffed back from her face, she relived the few bright moments she had had with Mr. Hammond of the Silver River Ranch. "I rode over to see him

on business. He sent a man out to say that Mr. Hammond hadn't returned from town—but I saw him dodging out of sight, from a window. I said so, and demanded a word with him. He hid his face the best he could, which didn't help much. He couldn't hide his temper in the least. He wasn't in any mood for idle chatter; he didn't get around to telling me into whose meat-grinding machine he had stumbled. He—"

"I heard about it before you did," said Edwards. "One of the boys brought out word. And it would seem, young woman, that you are largely responsible for what happened!"

Tess stared at him, her eyes growing big.

"*Me!* What on earth are you talking about?"

"If you hadn't hired that Injun Pete Morales, then probably Pete Morales wouldn't have been here, and probably wouldn't have gone off for a night in town with Buck Minor, whose actions also you would seem to be responsible for, Pandora; and then Pete Morales wouldn't have picked up Buck Minor's quarrel, and pounded the stuffing out of our good friend and neighbor!"

"Pedro Morales!" she gasped. "You mean he did that to Brew Hammond! Oh, Pedro, where art thou, Pedro? I could love thee, Pedro!— Say, Dad, Pedro's our luck! I told you how I followed his lead and won at a gambling game—"

"And you're no great admirer of Mr. Hammond? Hm. I thought, what with your popping off to see him every minute or two, dolling up and going buggy-riding with him to Las Nueces—"

Tess said "Puh" again. She added mysteriously, "There are reasons, respected sir!" Starting into the house, with one hand on the latch, she smiled back in the general direction of Bill Gaunt, said brightly, "I'll see you at lunch, Mr. Gaunt," and left the porch a quieter but vastly less colorful and delightful place.

Edwards leaned back in his chair and laughed long but silently.

"Didn't know you from Adam's off ox, Bill! 'Pedro, where art thou, Pedro? I could love thee, Pedro!' Well, dammit, I'm glad the little devil hasn't any use for Hammond. I was getting worried."

The two men chatted easily, like two old friends, until the midday meal was announced. Bill Gaunt Carson, responding to an interested question from the other man anent the projected reclamation of the bad lands down on the rim of the desert, sketched briefly his general plan which, even to him, remained somewhat

sketchy. Even so the elder man showed sparks of enthusiasm. Great work, he held it, taking something that was worse than useless, beautifying it, making it productive. When he was told—and here again Bill Gaunt went into no detail, not even mentioning the name of Harry Morton—how Brewster Hammond had committed himself, then had welched on the deal, Edwards nodded thoughtfully.

"You're right about my putting a flea into the ear of that headstrong girl of mine. I'd bet a man that already she distrusts as well as dislikes the man, but it will do no harm to make sure. I need not bring you into it."

Conversation drifted. At one time Edwards, looking off into some vague, misty distance, remarked,

"We've got a job cut out for us here, I guess, Bill. Remember what the Bible says—I'm not much good at remembering word for word—something about it being given to him who already hath, and all being taken away from him who hath not, or something like that? Ever notice how true that is? Right now that I can't be up and around I'm kind of sorry for that girl of mine, shouldering the whole mess, and I'm kind of proud of her, too. She's a whale of a girl! She brings me every day all the ranch news, good or bad; she doesn't coddle me, thank God. The latest is that our water's failing us; creeks look like they were drying up, and all of a sudden, a thing which everybody tells me never happened before on El Capitan. Why, water is one of the things that set me on buying the place! And now even the wells here at the ranch house and barns are going back on us."

Bill Carson thought of what Buck Minor had told him, but he said nothing. He meant to look into that matter himself before he started anything. He switched the talk to stock, only to run into more "bad luck," only again to recall Buck Minor's sweeping accusations and suspicions. Edwards, on purchasing El Capitan, had imported some high-grade bulls, determined on improving the strain of his cattle. Two of those bulls had sickened one day, died the next. Tess had taken over all livestock on the Silver River Ranch; a tally had been made—that was before Buck was cast out, when the ranch had been under his supervision—and now Jimmy Cotton, who had been advanced to the position made vacant through Buck's removal, announced that some thirty prime beef cattle were either lost or strayed—or stolen.

"It beats all hell," muttered Edwards. "Huh, Bill?"

"Sure does," said Bill, and was suddenly restless, suddenly impatient to get back to Buck Minor, to garner further information —and to get into things himself. He estimated, Hammond thinks he has just to do with a girl and one who, at that, can't know a whole lot about this sort of game. He's apt to overplay his hand, that's what he's apt to do. And it wouldn't surprise me any if that Tess girl knows or suspects more than she's let on to her old gent.

CHAPTER XI

Tess, meantime, had gone, fairly dancing, through the old house and to her own daintily appointed rooms on its far side overlooking a long sweep of meadow, the winding, willow bordered creek, and the far blue hills in the distance. The house, like most ranch houses of many years' standing, had grown through the years as families had grown with young folk growing up and marrying and, many of them, coming home to live and in due course to further populate the place with babies. Edwards had sent an architect and a score of workmen on ahead, remodeling and adding on, so that now he had a roomy and altogether comfortable retreat.

Tess slipped out of her clothes and dipped under the shower, as quick as a duck fluffing its feathers, or as a water ouzel dipping into a pool. She was singing as the pin-pricks of water came raining down on her. Singing and splashing—until of a sudden she grew still. What was she singing? What had put that old song into her? The air was most certainly *La Donna e Mobile*— She smiled, almost laughed out loud. *"Las Embras Todas,"* was what it was; that silly little thing that Pedro Morales had sung over his impertinent guitar. She tried to hum the words as he had translated them:

"All the nice ladies,
They leeve een the calmness;
They ain't got no heart,
They ain't got no soul!

They are ver' sweet an' nice,
An' they make-out they love you;
But when you get t'rough you goin' find out
They ain't got no heart an' they
Ain't got no soul!"

She did laugh this time and loud enough to be heard in an adjoining room through a closed door.

"Do you have to make all that racket, Tess?" called Lila's voice petulantly. "I've got a headache."

Tess did a most unladylike thing; she wrinkled up her pert nose and stuck out her tongue at the closed door—or what was beyond it. Then in a voice made so cloyingly sweet that a child of six would have sensed its mockery and would have yearned to slap her, she returned.

"Poor little Lila! All that excitement in Las Nueces, I suppose."

"You're a little beast, Tess," moaned Lila.

Tess completed her bath. Lila was silent, too, until the water was turned off. Then, "You might say hello, darn you, Tess," she said plaintively.

Tess, all aglow, sketchily draped in a big bath towel, opened the door and gazed in on Lila, and admitted to herself that perhaps Lila did actually have a headache. Either that or her customary boredom had run berserk within her discontented soul. For Lila, who under nearly all circumstances liked to preen and look as pretty as nature permitted, which was very pretty indeed, looked positively dowdy today. Her hair straggled, she was without make-up and therefore came pretty close to looking her age; in an old house-pajama suit she was both untidy and—Tess thought of the word!—unappetizing.

"It's nearly lunch time; want me to bring you a cup of tea or something?" Tess asked, not being altogether stony-hearted.

"No. I don't want anything." Lila was lying on her bed; Tess saw the corner of a candy box sticking out from under the pillow; Eddie Lowe had bought each girl a box of candy in Las Nueces. Tess was turning away when Lila said, her voice losing something of its plaintive quality, "Where've you been all morning, Tess?"

Tess giggled. She couldn't help it, but when she didn't want to help it.

"Over to see our handsome neighbor, the dashing Mr. Brewster Hammond! Do you blame me?"

Lila's face flushed; she sat up and made a considerable dent in a pillow with a small, clenched fist.

"Darn you, Tess! You keep away from Brew! I know what you're up to."

"Oh, do you?" Tess in her towel smiled, very serene. "And I'm to keep away, am I?"

"You're just trying to steal him from me—You're just set on —Oh, damn! You hate to have him even be nice to me."

"Why. Lila!" Tess, though very good at pretense of big-eyed amazement, was not good enough to fool Lila Edwards. "Why, Lila, you're a married woman! And both Brew and I are single, therefore, marriageable!"

"Married, am I?" snapped Lila. "Well, there are such things as divorces, aren't there?"

There, she'd said it. Said it for the first time after thinking of it days together. Tess regarded her critically. A fine thing, too, were Lila to have her divorce, a thing which Edward E. Edwards, for his part, would never contest. But Lila was the sort who would make sure of having husband number two on the string before she set husband number one loose. "I actually believe, too," thought Tess, "that she's in love with Brew Hammond! Well, two of a kind."

She said, "Well, I must go dress. I'm hungrier than Siberian wolves, a whole lot of them."

Lila stopped her with a quick, "What were you laughing at? When you said you had seen Brew?"

"He has had his handsome face re-done," Tess gurgled. "It looks as though it had been used first as a punching bag, then a chopping block! Brew could take a prize with it in a museum of horrors, honestly he could!"

"Tess!" Lila jumped up. "Tell me! What happened?"

Tess felt like waving her towel as a banner and doing a war dance.

"It would appear that, with the ladies out of the way, Mr. Hammond in Las Nueces got into a fight. It seems that he made a mistake in his man. One would judge that he got a peach of a licking! And you can't guess who knocked him cockeyed!"

"This is awful!" gasped Lila, really shocked. And then she thought to ask, "Who was the beast that hurt him so?"

"One of our own hands, none other than the romantic, gallant hearted son-of-the-South, Don Pedro Morales!" And Tess shut the bathroom door and scampered to her own room and a hasty dressing. As she was regarding herself in her mirror—after all, though she had scarcely noticed what he looked like—there was a young man to be polite to at the table. A Mr.—Mr.—oh, yes; with the funny name—Mr. William Gaunt. An old friend of her daddy's. She wrinkled her brows; she couldn't recall his ever mentioning any Gaunt—

The mellow sound of the dinner gong erased the wrinkle from her forehead and sped her along on runaway feet—her morning had filled her with zest—down the hall and to the front door. She saw the stranger standing on the porch, his back to her, as he looked out across the corrals and fields beyond and the far, broken upper end of El Capitan. Her father, she knew, had gone to his room for his preprandial dose of abhorrent medicine.

She wasn't sorry to find their guest alone; rather she welcomed a few words alone with him. She told herself that this Bill Gaunt, an old friend as Edwards had named him, hadn't seen her father for some considerable time; that the two men couldn't have met without her knowing, since Edwards had been so long confined to the house. She wondered if this man Gaunt would tell her the trūth, tell her whether he thought her father looked terribly ill now—it seemed to her that he was getting better, stronger, more like himself every day. And Tess, to speed the good work along, was working on a theory of her own. Edwards had endured a long, heart-breaking strain as he battled to salvage what he could from the wreck of his fortunes; he had gone for months with never a single night's good, sound sleep; at the end of the battle of the dollars he had been pretty much of a wreck himself. She blamed a large percentage of his present disorder upon a bedeviled mind; her theory was that what he wanted now was the counter-irritant which she provided in increasing doses by telling him frankly how bad things were with El Capitan, with what was left of their shattered finances, how disaster stalked them. She meant him to quit harking back on errors or lost chances, to get his back arched again, to get his danger up—to get plain mad and so get well again. That there was a lot of life in the old dog yet,

though perhaps this is an inelegant way of putting it, was about what she meant. And, by the by, it was the same sort of impression that the now vanished Pedro Morales had had of him.

Now, when she came to the door, Bill Gaunt turned toward her. His hand was lifted to his face; he was stroking his nose thoughtfully; he kept on stroking his nose and she saw but little of his mouth, of the lower part of his face. She said hastily, to have it said before Edwards returned to them,

"Tell me, Mr. Gaunt—you haven't seen father for some time—how to you think he is looking? Were you terribly shocked to see what his illness has done to him?"

"Do you know, Miss Edwards," Bill Gaunt told her, throwing his voice into as low a register as he could without croaking like a frog, "I see mighty little difference between Ted now and the way he looked the last time we were together. This illness of his—Shucks, he'll throw it off."

She brightened wonderfully. "Oh, I'm so glad! He is the most wonderful man I ever knew! He took an awful beating, of course; and he isn't used to that! But—Now right out that way, where you were looking when I came out, that's the upper end of El Capitan Ranch. It's one of the most beautiful—Oh, hello, Dad! Why do you creep up on me like an Indian?"

"I smell something good to eat," said Edwards. He gave her a hug, kept his arm about her, starting toward the dining room, calling, "Come ahead, Gill. Chow."

They sat not at the long table that would seat thirty and that had been pushed back against a well, but at a smaller round table drawn up to the windows which overlooked a sweep of lawn and the flower garden which had come into being since their taking over the ranch and which was still in its infancy though nicely shaded by some old orchard trees. In the kitchen was a Chinese cook, as might be known from his sing-song voice at intervals, hight Hi Gee Low, familiarly called Gee, addressing her helper; they were served by a young Chinese boy in white ducks who was remarkable for his cleanliness and an incredibly innocent pair of elongated eyes.

The moment the three were seating themselves was the moment that Lila chanced to hit upon to make her entrance. She had sniffed the fragrance wafted from a savory dinner; Hi Gee Low was an artist in his own little world. Further, she was bored with

a boredom long drawn out. On top of all, she was in a cantankerous mood that craved expression. She was half way in the dining room when she saw that there was a guest to lunch. A young man, too; tall and lean and, as she judged in a flash of a glance, distinguished looking, interesting, not at all unhandsome.

She came to a dead halt, registering a swift impression. At the same time she was realizing what a fright she must look! And she was reminding herself that Tess, the wretched little beast, hadn't said a word about there being company. Her moment of semi-paralysis was the briefest; the only thing to do was turn and run for it, which she did with all despatch and with no thought of any mislaid dignity.

Tess giggled but hurriedly smothered the little choking sound with her napkin.

Bill Gaunt said, "I didn't know you had two such lovely daughters, Ted."

Ted cleared his throat. "My wife, Bill," he said.

Tess had a working girl's appetite. "My, this soup is good!" she observed.

The Chinese boy beamed. "I go tell Hi Gee Low you say so, Miss Tessie. Then you hear him singing!"

"Tell him he cooks more like an angel every day. You look nice today, Charlie."

Charlie's beaming brightened. Bill Gaunt saw the look that sprang up in his Oriental eyes; for an instant they masked nothing whatever: Charlie Wong's adoration for Miss Tessie was genuine and without bounds.

"Better take Mrs. Edwards a cup of soup, Charlie," Edwards suggested.

Charlie said a grave, "Yes, sir." He moved silently away, but not far; merely to a little table in a corner of the room whence, on those swift, silent feet of his he returned bringing a single white rose evidently pulled some few moments ago. He laid it on the table at Tess' hand. She smiled up at him and tucked the rose in her hair, and Charlie slipped away, into the kitchen. Sure enough, in no time at all they heard Hi Gee Low's sing-song, hushed though it was, in a snatch of heathen chant.

"Tess," said her father, "what was the fight about in Las Nueces? Did you find out? A woman, I suppose?" He turned to

Bill Gaunt. "This Brew Hammond is a neighbor of ours; you wouldn't know him, I guess."

"I've heard his name," said Bill.

"We're doing business with him," Tess explained, "because we've got to. He owns the adjoining ranch, the Silver River; we've got to have it because of a failure of our water. If you don't know him you are just as well off. I never knew any man I'd not trust before Brew Hammond."

Her father was enjoying himself.

He played out his string.

He said innocently.

"And that Injun boy of ours, Pedro Morales, took the elegant Hammond to town! I'd rather have been in on that fight than had a ringside seat at a championship bout. And you, Miss Tess, what have you to say about our Pete Morales now?"

"He's a dear! Unmitigated rascal that he most undoubtedly is, and all 'round good-for-nothing, do you know, Dad, I've liked the brute from the first minute! He is one of those unpredictable humans, you know. You've seen him ride! You should see him gamble! Oh, he's just plumb crazy, our Pedro is, but somehow the most likable scalawag there ever was. Oh, I've wanted to slap his face a hundred times, but—

She chanced to catch a queer look telegraphed between her father and Bill Gaunt, and she came close to understanding the code and deciphering the messages flashed back and forth. Bill Gaunt's look said as plain as print, "Ted, damn you!" and Ted Edwards' look said, "I'm having me my fun, Bill! You leave me alone."

"Go ahead, Tess," said Edwards. "Why'd you want to slap the poor devil?"

Tess sat perfectly still, grown rigid. Her eyes were turned on Bill Gaunt now, and he had never seen on anyone's face such an expression of perfect concentration. Puzzled at first, she was; uncertain, groping. Her eyes narrowed and narrowed, and her brows gathered in the intensity of her study of him.

Then of a sudden her face went as red as a beet, a blazing, hot, fiery red. The red ran up out of sight in her hair, it flooded her cheeks and stained her white throat scarlet.

When she moved it was after the fashion of a streak of lightning. She shoved her chair back, sprang to her feet, leaned forward across the table—and slapped Mr. Pedro Morales Bill Carson Bill Gaunt's face as hard as she could.

Then she left the room without a word or a backward look.

Bill Gaunt gasped and put a hand to his tingling jaw.

Ted Edwards chuckled; his chuckle swelled into a low rumbling like thunder, the deep booming thunder that follows the lightning; then he burst into the most rollicking laughter Bill Gaunt Carson had ever heard from him or any other man.

"Guess she knows you now, Pedro," Edwards choked, wiping his eyes on his napkin.

"You go to hell," said Bill Carson.

CHAPTER XII

At the farthermost tip of the upper end of El Capitan Ranch, in a place of rugged mountains, sheer cliffs, giant boulders and tiny pockets of ordinarily lush meadows, there stood a long-abandoned cabin, half rock, half rough, unhewn logs. The place was hard to come at, hid away in a densely timbered ravine with no traveled trail leading to it, only the winding paths of deer and bear making a network through the thickets and dark pine forests shutting it in. Bill Gaunt would have been hard beset to come upon the place had he not had very explicit directions from Buck Minor with whom he had a rendezvous here.

Buck Minor, traveling circuitous trails in order not to be seen by anyone belonging to El Capitan outfit, arrived with the early dark. He led a pack horse well burdened with blankets, pots and pans and generous amounts of those sundries which, when a man is living the life of a mountaineer in an air that is so crisp and rare as to be positively heady, and who is in the saddle or on foot from daybreak to nightfall, are not only a necessity but a delight. Buck was not the man to overlook a single article, be it ever so humble, from matches and salt, through dried onions and potatoes, a wide variety in tin goods, bacon in the side, coffee

by the pound, clean down to canned peaches and tomatoes and slabs of chocolate. He brough not so much as a single bottle of hard liquor with him. Ax and shovel just naturally topped off his equipment.

They built a blazing log fire in the old rock fireplace and almost drove themselves out with smoke and the blast of heat, but presently the smoke was sucked up the chimney, the draft whipped some of the flames up after it, and in what light was afforded they took the first steps toward making a camp that had a certain air of permanence about it; it looked as though they planned to remain here some time. And they got supper by the fireplace, planning a stove of sorts later on, and Buck Minor reported on his first day's work for his new boss whom he knew only as Bill. Now and then Buck's tongue slipped and he said Pedro.

He had found and brought along Bill's saddle, saddle-blanket and bridle. The horse which Bill had turned loose with its game leg had long ago gone on its way, leaving behind it no sign to indicate cause, direction or style of its departure.

"Somebody could have dropped a rope over it, seeing as how it looked lost," said Buck. "Or maybe it just got lonesome and went looking for company. Or maybe headed back home, wherever that might be—" and there was the hint of a rising inflection in his voice. Doggone it, he was thinking, being as human as any other man, his boss Bill might as well tell where he had come from, even if he was taking his time in tying a name to himself.

"My name is Bill Gaunt, and I come from down Texas way," said Bill.

Buck snorted. "You don't need to tell me you're Texan; a man can tell by listening to you talk—if you're letting yourself talk natural at last. Bill Gaunt, huh? Did folks ever call you Lying Bill down where you come from?"

"A little more respect toward your employer please, Mr. Minor. Or am I to take back the money I advanced against your wages?"

"No can do," grinned Buck. "Spent most of it already, kid. Look what I got me for a toy in Las Nueces."

The pack horse, along with blankets and provisions, had brought something which until now that Buck showed it off pridefully

Bill Gaunt had not noticed: A brand new rifle, Winchester 30-30 with cartridge belt and shells galore.

"I listened to folk talk, down there in town," Buck went on. "And they sure had a lot to say. Some was wondering who and what in hell you was; they tackled me about it; what little I told 'em wasn't much. If I'd opened up with all I knowed, still it wouldn't have been much, and I didn't even open up. They talked a good deal about that feller Steve Quinton, too. They figgered that Quinton, being shot in the back the way he was, couldn't very well have shot a hole in your hat and nicked you in the arm. They's a good many of 'em wouldn't be surprised if what you said was right, and that Brew Hammond cut him down. Me, I sort of figger it that way myself. Oh, of course, you might of done it while you was still Pete Morales and anyhow half Injun."

"And so the rifle, Buck?"

"You got it the first guess. Hammond mightn't like neither one of us none to speak on. We're mightly close to his stamping ground; he mighn't like that either. What he might do, if he spots us, is take a long shot at us, same as at Quinton. Seems as though he's a right good shot with a rifle. Me, too."

He stood his new weapon in a corner, hung his filled cartridge belt on a peg driven into a chink between logs, and went on with camp preparations.

Time enough tomorrow to think of constructing bunks, probably with green poles topped off with pine tips; tonight kick off your boots, turn into your blankets and call it a day.

"Of course we're trespassing on El Capitan land," said Bill Gaunt by way of goodnight. "And I don't know that either of us would be welcome." It would be hard, he thought, to find two men likely to be less welcome, Buck Minor who had so recently been fired by an irate Tess, Bill Gaunt who even more recently had had his face soundly slapped by an even more irate Tess.

"Shucks," observed Buck out of his blankets. "No one's apt to come poking around up here; a man could hide out up here for a month. Unless, of course," he added for the record, "unless he goes and advertises with fire and smoke that he's here."

They went to sleep on that.

They were astir before the world was wide awake. There was

a broad and broadening band of pale light in the eastern sky, scarcely more than a vague thinning of darkness above the black pines on the ridges where the ranch border line ran; a few sleepy birds piped up uncertainly as though nodding in a doze, the faintest and most tangy of dawn breezes came stealing through the tree tops, tenderly hushed like the secret whispering of lovers. The smell of their fire with quick tongues of flame licking into resinous pockets floated out to them; the fire crackled merrily and made coals on the hearth for their cooking; they had used dry wood so as to make no unnecessary smudge of smoke. They brought cold water from the creek and presently their coffee came to a boil and bacon sputtered in the skillet. Then it was full morning, though no sun would come down into their hollow for more than an hour yet; the loftier peaks towering over the Smoking Springs Ranch were like giants in armor against which drove the gold-tipped horizontal spears of the advancing day. The birds knew it was morning come again; they burst into full song.

"Suppose you hold the fort today, Buck," Bill Gaunt suggested. "Dig in and pitch camp, hide your horses some place where there's grass and water and where they're not apt to be seen, lie under a tree and smoke. I aim to go riding and have a look-see."

"Silver River?"

"I was thinking of it."

"Hammond?"

"Don't think so. I'm not ready for that gent yet, Buck."

"You know how welcome you'll be if he spots you. Pretty good shot, Bill?'

"Fair," said Bill Gaunt, and asked, "How many men has he on his payroll? Will I count on running into any of 'em at the upper end of the Silver River?"

"It ain't likely. The ranch house is a good five-six miles lower down. I don't know how many hands he's got right now; when he turned over his stock to Miss Tess he let every man he had go, even to the cook. After that, one of the boys was telling me, he took on a couple new hands, two-three I reckon."

"What for?"

Buck shrugged. "Chores, I reckon. And remember, he shot off some giant powder after that. Guess he needed a hand or

two." Buck downed what coffee was left in his pint-sized coffee cup and wiped his mouth daintily on the back of a hairy hand. "Men he could count on, I s'pose; men that would take orders and not ask questions the way—"

"The way you do!" Bill Gaunt grinned and stood up.

Bill Gaunt rode that day into country that was all new to him, seldom with any sort of trail underfoot except the runs made by deer between their watering places and grazing lands and brushy lairs. It didn't suggest itself to him until after he had been in the saddle a couple of hours that the horse he rode was El Capitan property, Tess Edwards' horse! He chuckled, thinking what she would have to say of it when she, in her turn, got around to thinking of it. An odd girl, he told himself, all touch-and-go. As full of fire even in repose as a piece of flint merely waiting for the steel to come along—and Bill Gaunt was the steel! Well, she was the first girl ever to slap his face, and somehow he found himself chuckling even over that! At the time he could have grabbed her and shaken her the way you shake a medicine bottle, and could have taken her across his knee—only she had left the room, leaving him in a state of paralysis! With the thing done and his face cool again, he didn't in the least blame her. He had made her pay, pay in full and right up to the hilt for almost running him down that day and leaving him to trudge along in her dust. Maybe they were about square now. He couldn't help wondering whether she felt that way about it.

With many matters to meditate upon as he drifted through the pine forests or climbed and went down steep, rocky slopes, he found ample time to think a good deal of Tess Edwards; to realize that he had thought more of her, despite several puzzles he had found to contend with, than of anything or anyone else. A girl like her got into a man's mind and stuck there. A girl like her? We-ll, there weren't any other girls like Tess.

From a high place whereon there grew only a scattering of pines he looked far out, across the reaches of the Silver River Ranch, straight ahead, and down onto the distant blue-gray haze that spelled the dry lands edging the desert, the region of the thousands of acres which he had already bought, which he had thought some day to reclaim. Now? He couldn't be sure.

He looked off across the parts of El Capitan which were re-

vealed to him from here, broken vistas beyond the bordering range. But his eyes came back to the Silver River Ranch. Whose was it, right now, Hammond's or Tess Edwards'—or, by some chance, Bill Carson's? It was a ranch to fill a man's eyes, perhaps his heart, a land of broad, running acres, of vivid green meadows and tall forests, most of all a land of bright flowing waters.

Glinting like sun-smitten quicksilver, far below him was Silver Lake, a fair jewel, a liquid mirror, its tiny, breeze-stirred ripples washing the bases of the mountains among which it was set, and from Silver Lake raced Silver River, winding and glinting and weaving its own white lace among boulders, breaking into cascades, loitering in broad, placid pools, overhung and often hidden by its marginal willows and aspens with their million dancing leaves. A land of beauty, of abundance—a land of free running water.

Water running wild—and so near the thirsting desert! Water! In the west, men killed one another for water oftener than for gold. For here water *was* gold, and more.

"Whose?" Tess Edwards', or was Hammond cheating her out of it? Brew Hammond's, or had it finally passed out of his control? Bill Carson's, even yet? There was the annoyingly absent Harry Morton to remember and speculate upon.

Even without the explicit directions he had had from Buck Minor to the scene of Brew Hammond's blasting operations he would have had small difficulty in locating it. First, though he had seen Silver Lake only once, and that a long while before, yet he remembered it almost photographically, having been so struck with its sylvan loveliness. Its depths of clear waters, blue or silvery or emerald green as fitted the hour or the weather or the season, had been trimmed in many places with narrow strips of white, sandy beaches strewn with polished pebbles, shaded by aspens, with fringing red mountain willows along the ripple-washed shore. Now there was not a sandy beach to be seen; even the shore willows had for the most part vanished leaving behind them only the tops of a few of the taller ones rising out of the water. The lake's overflow had been checked, the source of the river dammed, the water backed up. And on the side of the ravine through which the river at its source found its way toward the lower lands, was the fresh scar made by the great

blasts which, heard afar, had sounded to Buck Minor like rolling thunder.

There was one ugly, savage scar on the mountainside bespeaking the tearing away and pouring down into the lower lake and into the source of the river of thousands of tons of rock and rubble, and there were other similar scars. The greatest of all was some three or four hundred feet nearer where Bill Gaunt sat his horse on the ridge; it marked a spot of which he knew nothing at first hand but of which Buck Minor had told him. There it was that, when the water was at its lowest after a year of little rain and snow, just above water-line there were revealed the yawning maws of several great fissures in the rocks; it was down through those monster crevices and through still others below the surface, or so judged Buck Minor, that the springs and creeks of El Capitan Ranch had their beginnings. Plugged now by all the débris that had come in a roaring avalanche down the cliffsides. Well, a man might say—no doubt Brew Hammond had said to himself—that a man had the right to do what he pleased on and with his own property. He could say that he hadn't meant to cut off the water from his neighbor; he could say he didn't even know that El Capitan streams had Silver Lake to thank for their being; he could say he was up to something altogether different.

"And it's one thing," thought the frowning Bill Gaunt. "to cork up those holes that used to let the water through, and another thing to uncork 'em!"

Still, he held that what one man has done another man may undo. Some sorts of natural tunnels extended from the lake through the base of the flanking mountains all the way to the upper reaches of El Capitan. If dynamite had sealed the mouths of the fissures now hidden under water, might not other blasts re-open the closed channels? Or even open up other great cracks to again pour the water through the fault that sliced through the rocks? It was a pleasant thought to dally with—

In the midafternoon when he returned to camp he found Buck Minor busied with making the place snug and livable. He sang out,

"Say, Buck! You tell me we're trespassing here on El Capitan. Just how close to the north boundary are we anyhow?"

"Pretty close, Bill. Shucks, I wouldn't know exactly where the line is; nobody pays much attention to a half mile or so."

Bill Gaunt swung down from the saddle.

"Come along with me, Buck," he said. "Not far; we'll take it on foot. I want to show you something. I made a bend to the south as I rode back and— Come ahead."

Buck dropped his ax, made a cigarette and followed. Bill Gaunt led the way down the thin trickle of a creek for a couple of hundred yards, then crossed through the fringing willows and scrambled up a bit of rocky slope to a narrow strip of bench-land whereon grew a few scrubby pines and a single enormous one, a towering yellow pine.

"Ever scrambled up here before, Buck?" he asked.

"Hell, no," said Buck. "Why should I?"

"You've seen this big pine? A man could see it miles away."

"Sure. What about it? It's like any other big pine tree."

"Is it? Take a good look at it."

Buck, when invited to inspect the thing, was not an instant in seeing what he was supposed to see. He scratched his head.

"It's a marker," he said. "It's been blazed; a long time ago." He rubbed the ancient scar on the tree with the heel of his hand. "What about it, Bill?"

"Of course it's a marker, and of course it marks the north boundary of El Capitan Ranch! And the old shack where we're hanging out is a good step north of here, and isn't on El Capitan at all! It might be a good thing to know, Buck—in case anybody should want to chase us off for trespassing!"

"Meaning Miss Tess!"

"Whose land are we camping on then, Buck?"

"We're on the edge of the old White Rock Ranch, but I never knowed it before. This end of it, like you see, don't amount to much, but there's some pretty fair cow country—"

"How big a ranch is it? The White Rock?"

"It ain't big just two-three sections, I dunno—"

"Who owns it?"

"Old man Budge, Sam Budge. He—"

"He wouldn't be chasing off trespassers, would he?"

"Hell, no, not old Sam. Besides, I don't believe he even knows it's his land down here. Like I said, it's no good and—"

Bill Gaunt wasn't listening. His eyes appeared to be set upon

some far distance, and there was a glint of light in them. He made some sort of sound as he turned away, whether a grunt or a curse or a chuckle Buck Minor was doggoned if he knew.

Back at the cabin, only midafternoon as it was and bright and warm, Bill Gaunt started a fire in the fireplace. He got it to blazing, bright and hot, then went out for an armful of willow branches, thick with their green leaves and piled them high upon his fire. Smoke filled the room, boiled up out of the stone chimney. Buck Minor coughed and sputtered and scurried out into the open.

"Gone crazy, Bill?" he demanded. "What the devil do you think you're doin'?"

Bill Gaunt grinned broadly.

"Me, I'm setting me a trap." He chuckled.

CHAPTER XIII

"Ted Edwards," said Tess Edwards, bestowing upon her father as evil a look as she could manage, and she felt that she had never been in a mood more favorable for evil looks, "how does it happen that you have lived as long as you have without somebody killing you?"

Mr. Edwards lifted his brows and assumed his most innocent expression.

"My dear girl!"

"Wipe that look off your face! You're overdoing it anyhow. Just who is this Bill Gaunt person?"

Of course he knew it was coming and so was more or less ready for it. And despite her command, he kept what he could of his look of innocence.

"Oh, Bill Gaunt. Didn't I tell you that he was an old friend of mine, and—"

"An old friend!" She sniffed. "Funny I never heard you even mention his name! Tell me, who is he?"

"You seemed to recognize him all right!" He couldn't any longer suppress his chuckle. "When you slapped him—Say, kid!

You shouldn't have galloped out of the room so fast! You should have taken a good look at his face; it went as red as yours was!"

"If you wake some morning, old timer, with your throat cut you'll know who did it!" She glared at him in brooding silence a moment. "Bill Gaunt! If that is really who he is! As Pedro Morales, a half-breed Indian, he had a lovely time making a monkey out of your daughter. Now he comes back as Bill Gaunt and makes a howling jackass out of her. And you— Oh, I heard you laughing your head off, like a hyena!"

"Quite a menagerie we're getting, Tess."

"All this time that he has been at the ranch, posing as Injun Pete and making a fool of me, you've been squatting on your darned porch taking in the show and holding your sides to keep them from splitting! Look here! Were you in on it from the jump? Did you know Pedro Morales for Bill Gaunt the first day he came?"

He shook his head; he even began to grow serious. After all it was tough on the kid; she had real enough troubles of her own already, and this was piling it up on her.

"No," he answered her. "At first I didn't know him from Adam's off ox; who would, all rigged out like a worse than half-breed the way he was, mostly Indian, you'd say? I took him for what he told you he was, Pedro Morales."

She was eyeing him suspiciously; it would be a long time before she would altogether trust him again.

"When did you first find out that he was Bill Gaunt—if that is really who he is!"

"Why—er— Oh, when did I find out that—"

"You quit your stalling! You heard me, Ted Edwards."

"Sure I heard you. Well, I just discovered today that he was Bill Gaunt."

And of course that was, in a loose sort of way, the truth. If she had chanced to say, "When did you first recognize this man?" that would have been different; he had known he was Bill Carson for some little time. But, doggone it, he had promised Bill to keep his mouth shut.

"Who is he?"

"Why—he's Bill Gaunt, of course. A friend of mine. He—"

"An old friend, you said, when you introduced him. Known him a long time then?"

"We-ll, no. Not very long. But he's all right, Tess. He's as right as rain, Bill is."

"I wonder! Sometimes I think you're a credulous old dope, Mr. Edwards. You have made a few bad boners in your time; otherwise you wouldn't be down to bedrock right now; otherwise you wouldn't have—"

She bit back the words; ready as she felt to skin her father alive she couldn't quite bring herself to saying what was on the tip of her tongue: "Otherwise you wouldn't have married that Lila thing!" She said instead,

"What's he doing here? Why did he pretend to be Indian Pete? What's he got up his sleeve?"

Entirely truthful this time he could answer promptly.

"I don't know. I know why he came in the first place; he told me that. He had lamed his horse; he was sore footed with walking; you drove by him in your car without offering him a leg up, and it made him sore as Billy-be-damned. Then when your car stalled he took his chance; he started in to—well, to tease you. I guess you'd call it."

She meditated. "It *was* a dirty trick to pass him up without offering him a ride and I don't altogether hold it against him that he did put one over on me. We'll skip that. But why stick around all this time? Why is he hanging around now?"

"Your fatal charm, maybe, my dear?" he suggested slyly.

Again Tess sniffed. "He hasn't looked at me once—" No, hadn't he? How about those few minutes in Las Nueces when she and he stood together on the sidewalk, when he was tricked out like a young south-of-the-border dandy? Hadn't he looked at her then in a way that was vaguely disconcerting? She said again, her eyes bright and angry, a warmer color in her cheeks, "Who *is* the man? You haven't told me that yet!"

"Dammit," said Edwards, "I have told you. He is Bill Gaunt. He comes from down Texas way. He used to be a rancher. He hasn't told me a lot about himself."

They were on the porch, he in his chair, she on the bench, her elbow on her knee, her chin on his fist. She got up suddenly and walked to the edge of the porch, standing there with her back to him, staring out into distances where blue mountains rose against the sky, blue mountains which she did not even see. Without turning, she said presently, her voice stilled and steady,

"I know you, Ted Edwards. When you will you will, and when you won't you won't. You've made up your mind to keep your mouth shut; well, do it. I'll do the same." She managed a small, tight-lipped laugh. "After what I handed your old playmate, Mr. Bill Gaunt, we're not apt to have him under our feet again. Next time I'd shoot him on sight."

"Who's this you're going to shoot on sight, Tess?" said Lila.

Lila had a way all her own of appearing without any advance advertising of her approach.

"I guess you've heard it all," said Tess, still without turning.

Lila idled out onto the porch, trailing cigarette smoke after her. Her husband, not altogether old-fashioned, still did not like to see a woman smoke; Tess never smoked in his presence, seldom out of it. Lila, full of venom these days, having lost her chief gamble, never missed a bet when there was a chance of making Ted Edwards pay on the installment plan for her discomfiture. She said in her languidly drawling fashion,

"The handsome stranger, Mr. Bill Gaunt? And so you did slap him, Tess? And really he was masquerading as the romantic Señor Don Pedro Morales? How thrilling!"

Lila appeared faintly amused. She flicked the ash from her cigarette with a dainty little finger, gave no evidence of noting that she was being left uninterrupted in a bit of monologue, and added,

"And so Mr. Bill Gaunt was the one, playing at being Pedro, who fought with Brew Hammond in town! Does Brew know yet that Pedro was this Bill Gaunt individual?"

"If he doesn't know, there's no call telling him, Lila," said Edwards mildly.

Lila laughed.

"Where did our Bill Gaunt go?" she asked. "Is he coming back?"

At last Tess condescended to speak. She spoke not to please Lila but to voice a thought that had been swelling within her like steam under pressure. She said briefly,

"He rode off on an El Capitan horse. He'd better get it back in a hurry or I'll have him arrested as a horse thief."

"Now, now, Tess," began her father. But Tess flung about and vanished within the house to reappear within a few minutes dressed for riding.

And meanwhile, for four days Bill Gaunt's "trap" had been set at various times and the lure of his bait had netted him exactly nothing at all. Great volumes of black smoke had surged billowing upward from the old rock chimney in a wavering column that could have been seen for miles, and yet no one came to investigate.

The day after his discovery of the blazed boundary pine he had ridden early into Las Nueces; no smoke that day. He had not cut across El Capitan Ranch, giving it a wide berth by riding at first north across the White Rock Ranch, then curving back toward town through the Smoking Springs. At the White Rock Ranch he had tarried an hour for a talk with old Sam Budge and a bit of business with that grizzled old timer. Then, satisfied to complacency, he had headed straight into Las Nueces. A visit to the post office brought him a scattering of mail, forwarded from his Texas ranch; nothing of any immediate urgency. Nothing, for example, from the vanished Harry Morton, though he had begun to hope there might be a line from him.

Then to the telegraph office where he picked up a message which more than interested him, which troubled him more and more as he dwelt upon it. It was from his canny lawyer down in Los Angeles, Eddie Lowe. It said briefly that Harry Morton had never reached Mexico City, that business associates down there were puzzled about his protracted delay, that, although he was punctilious about keeping all appointments, he was now long overdue and that no word had come from him. And Lowe in his wire hinted that maybe after all Bill Carson's estimate of his friend was all cockeyed; that it was likely that Harry Morton had pocketed Bill's ten thousand and perhaps some other loose thousands along with them, and had skipped the country.

Bill hadn't shed any tears over the abrupt taking off of Steve Quinton but right now he felt Quinton's loss as he would have felt the loss of a close friend. For Quinton had known a whole lot about Harry Morton and about Brew Hammond—and now Quinton was dead, his mouth adroitly shut, and Brew Hammond was no doubt laughing up his sleeve, and Harry Morton—

Steve Quinton had blackmailed Brew Hammond. It all had something to do with Harry Morton. And Hammond had killed Quinton. Then what about Morton? From that time on, Bill Gaunt Carson had not the slightest doubt that Harry Morton was

dead, too, and that Steve Quinton was dead only because he knew all about it.

Bill Gaunt went to the hardware store and asked questions. He wanted a man who could handle dynamite, and he wanted the dynamite along with him, and he wanted both to report to him the next day. The storekeeper had the explosive and it was his job to sell it; so he scratched his head and dug up the man to take care of everything for a mere ten dollars a day, an old bald-headed, hard-rock miner dubbed Baldy "Ugly" Ule. Ule would get a team and haul the stuff out in the morning. Where was he to bring it?

"Out to the White Rock Ranch."

"Oh, old Sam Budge's place?"

"Used to be Sam Budge's place," nodded Bill Gaunt, and turned homeward.

And the next day Bill Gaunt's trap was sprung. Of course, a man can't always be sure of catching the very first time the particular quarry he had set his heart on; hoping for a silver fox he might catch a skunk. You never can tell. Well, anyhow the trap worked. And it was Bide Kincaid from El Capitan who rode into camp to see what was afoot.

Bide Kincaid. He was one of the few hands on El Capitan for whom Bill Gaunt, when frequenting the place as Pedro Morales, had had less than no use, the long, lean, silent man with the scarred face and the eyes that were always somewhere else when you sought to look into them.

Buck Minor was the first to see Bide Kincaid riding into camp. He snorted.

"It was a pretty good handful of boys we had workin' on El Capitan," he said. "This Kincaid hombre, I never did fancy the cut of his eye nor the trip of his tongue, neither. Once I told him so and was getting all wound up to knock hell out of him, only the yeller dog wouldn't fight. He'd suck eggs, though. Me, I would have fired him, only Miss Tess wouldn't let me. She said he was a good man; that he'd been sent over to her by Brew Hammond, and—"

"By Hammond, huh?"

"Used to work for Hammond. When Hammond started letting his men go—"

"Look here, Buck; maybe he won't know me. I want him to. So if he can't tie me in with Pete Morales you speak up—"

Bide Kincaid, his hat pulled low, his eyes hidden, came riding slouchily into camp.

"Hello, Buck," he said in his high-pitched, all but whining voice. "So it's you, is it?" His eyes came out of hiding enough to take stock of Buck Minor, to trail across Bill Gaunt, up and down him, too, taking him in from top to toe. "When'd you get back, Buck?"

Buck Minor, not a surly man ordinarily, answered surlily.

"Been here a few days," he said.

"You ain't working for El Capitan again, are you?" asked Kincaid.

"Nor ain't going to," said Buck.

Bide Kincaid eased himself sideways in the saddle; he kept looking curiously at Bill Gaunt. Bill knew well enough what irked the man: he was dead sure he had seen this stranger somewhere, sometime, but at the jump Bide Kincaid was at a loss to know when and where. He said casually,

"I seen your smoke, Buck. What'n hell are you fellers burning anyways?"

Buck remembered his orders. He said,

"Me and Pedro—Say, Kincaid, I bet a man a dollar you didn't even know Pedro Morales, now he's shaved his whiskers off and looks sorta like a white man! Well, we was burning whatever it was that we was burning that makes smoke come up out'n the chimney when it gets burned."

Obviously Bide Kincaid heard him less than half way through.

"Pete Morales?" He stared straight and hard this time. "Well, I'm damned," he admitted.

Bill Gaunt didn't say anything. Instead, he tried to look like a trapper who had got caught in his own trap. He tried to look guilty, tried not to grin while he was doing it. Oh, trust Bide Kincaid to spur along back to ranch headquarters with word that the fired foreman, Buck Minor, and the detested Pedro Morales, alias Bill Gaunt, were making themselves free of the upper reaches of the ranch!

"Well, so long," said Kincaid. "I just saw your smoke and wondered."

Bill Gaunt whispered in Buck Minor's ear. Buck shouted after the departing Bide Kincaid.

"Say, Kincaid! Do me a favor, will you? Just forget you saw us up here, huh? Don't say anything to anybody back at the ranch. Huh?"

"Sure!" Kincaid called back, and rode all the faster.

And then, of course, Tess came.

She could not have come more opportunely. She came with fire in her eye and with four well heeled men at her back. Bide Kincaid for one, Gonzaga whom Bill Gaunt remembered as "Zaga," the nondescript crossbred southern Arizonan as the second—an unappetizing duo—with old Jimmy Cotton and Tom Jones following along without enthusiasm. Both old Jimmy and young Jones were dyed in the wool friends of Buck Minor's.

The moment was particularly opportune because only a short while ago Bill Gaunt's new recruit from Las Nueces, old Baldy "Ugly" Ule, the man who played with sticks of dynamite as a baby plays with barber-pole sticks of candy, had been on the job only a couple of hours and was really getting busy. He was as free with dynamite as lots of men are with other men's money. Bill Gaunt had shown him the spot; he had said succinctly, "Blow all hell out of the side of the mountain here where this trickle of a spring oozes out. Let's see what's behind it." So old man Baldy "Ugly" Ule blew. Blasted is the right word.

For Bill Gaunt had dallied with a theory, what he regarded merely as a hunch that might be worth trying out. Why not? All it could cost him was a few dollars for dynamite. He had accepted Buck Minor's contention that all the water on El Capitan, its springs and creeks, came from Silver River Ranch, most of it straight from Silver Lake, finding a way through cracks and fissures, perhaps natural tunnels and caverns stringing along a fault hidden deep under the mountain. Bill Gaunt said to himself that there had been a whale of a lot of water pouring through under the mountain, so the cracks and fissures in the rock must be of ample proportions. Suppose a man blew out the rocky slopes on this side, where the springs had been aforetime? Might he not open up a channel directly into the subterranean waterways, open it wide and possibly tap some hidden reservoirs where water had backed up under pressure? If so, if he let these reservoirs run dry,

what would happen up at Silver Lake? Nature still abhorred vacuums, didn't she? There'd be a vast empty hole, there'd be the pressure of the higher waters in the lake, there'd be as a wall against them only the rubble that Brew Hammond had tumbled down into the lake on his side of the border line—and it just might be that Silver Lake's countless tons of water, piling up, would break through again and come spilling generously, perhaps even more generously than ever before, down upon the thirsty, rapidly drying up El Capitan.

To think of it was to get busy and to take a chance with some lusty loads of dynamite. Therefore, Baldy "Ugly" Ule. Therefore, the tremendous blast, timed by Lady Chance, at the moment of Tess Edwards' arrival.

Bill Gaunt and Buck Minor were down by the cabin; "Ugly" Ule was higher up, five hundred yards away, on the mountain flank where three of the major springs, separated from one another by only a few hundred paces, had gushed throughout the years. "Ugly" Ule lighted his fuses and ran.

And Tess Edwards, with her armed retinue, rode into camp.

Even Tess carried a light rifle over her arm. Not only was fire in her eye, there was something akin to "Ugly" Ule's explosive in her heart. For Bide Kincaid, like an arrow to its mark, had gone straight to her with word that her discharged foreman, Buck Minor, and that half-breed Pete Morales were making themselves very much at home on the upper end of her ranch; looked like they'd dug in to stay—

Bill Gaunt, who had done little but plague Miss Tess Edwards from the first moment he met her and who remembered vividly the slap she had so recently given him, experienced a sensation that was like an inward gloating. The girl, all anger and headlong impatience, rode some two or three lengths ahead of her small posse; she set her horse up on bunched and sliding hoofs just in time to avoid running Mr. Bill Gaunt down. She started in on him before the dust settled.

"Mr. Gaunt," she said in a voice that bit like the stinging of hornets, "you and Buck Minor, who has been discharged from El Capitan, both know that you are trespass—"

And then it was, filling Bill Gaunt's cup to overflowing, that Baldy "Ugly" Ule let go his thunderous detonation. The girl's fiery words were drowned out in the great roar of the explosion

which shook the ground under them, which went rolling and booming and reechoing through the mountains. Tess, startled, broke off and didn't even get her mouth closed before the second blast went off making a din as of great guns, drawing all eyes to a geyser of rock and soil and brush and small trees shooting skyward from the mountain flank. Tess got her mouth shut, drew a deep breath—and the third blast caught her with her mouth open again.

Bill Gaunt laughed softly, laughed, she thought, just like a devil.

"Howdy, Tess," he said genially. "Welcome to our camp. Light down, won't you, and make yourself at home?"

"At home?" she gasped. "You know perfectly well that I am at home, that this is my land and that you are trespassing. And—"

"You mean it?" said Bill Gaunt. "You mean this is El Capitan property?"

Oh, how the man goaded her! Bringing her rifle along, she hadn't exactly meant to shoot anyone but right now she was sorely tempted!

"Don't be a fool," she cried hotly. "If you didn't know, and of course you did know, Buck Minor would have told you. I'm giving you about ten minutes to pack your traps and move on."

He grinned at her, stirring new depths of fury deep down within her.

"Now, Miss Tess," he said ingratiatingly, "you wouldn't do a thing like that, would you? You wouldn't chase Buck and me off, not after we've worked so hard making us a camp, would you? I know you wouldn't do a thing like that; you're too kind hearted—"

"Mr. Gaunt," she cut him short, her eyes blazing from a face which had whitened with her anger, "you are to go right now! Hear me? *Right now!*"

Bide Kincaid, who had drawn up close behind her and who had been looking off across the willow-fringed creek toward the site of the blasts, said sharply,

"We're pretty close to where they're blastin', Miss Edwards. There might be another shot—"

She kept her glowing eyes on Bill Gaunt. She moistened her lips before she spoke. She said in a low, suppressed voice,

"Are you responsible for that too, Mr. Gaunt? For the dynamite?"

He nodded without disturbing his grin.

"I'm not doing much damage, though," he said equably. "In fact, if I have any luck, I might even be doing some good. You see, thinking things over, how we've had our creeks and springs and even the El Capitan wells drying up on us—"

She made a swift half-turn in her saddle.

"Kincaid," she commanded crisply, "you boys drive these two men off my place. I've ordered them off; if they don't go peacefully and promptly—*make them go!* Don't shoot to kill unless you have to, but make them go!"

"Aw, now, Tess," said Bill Gaunt, "be human. Don't drive us off. I tell you we're not doing any harm here—"

"It's harm enough," she blazed out at him, "if you so much as set foot on my land! Don't ever dare do it again!"

Buck Minor scratched his head and then scraped dirt with his foot; it seemed to him that Bill Gaunt was driving the girl pretty hard; there was apt to be one hell of a row bust loose any minute. He looked beyond both Bill Gaunt and Tess Edwards to the El Capitan men. They looked anxious-eyed, mildly troubled, yet not at all uncertain. They had a job of work to do and would do it. There were Kincaid and Gonzaga who would willingly enough chase the interlopers off; there were old Jimmy Cotton and young Tom Jones, both of whom liked Buck Minor and the former Pedro Morales, who didn't want to see any trouble. And both knew Buck Minor a mule for stubbornness, and both fancied that Injun Pete who had in so queer a fashion turned into this Bill Gaunt, white man, might turn out to be as hard to handle as Buck.

"You heard me, Bide Kincaid!" Tess called sharply.

Bide Kincaid, his rifle across his saddle, looked back briefly to Gonzaga, and Gonzaga, likewise ready with his weapon, spurred to his side.

"You boys move along," said Kincaid. "You heard, Buck. You heard, Morales. All right—*hot foot! Beat it!*"

Bill Gaunt spoke up in such gentle-voiced fashion that Tess eyed him in a new way, curiously and a shade suspiciously.

"If we've got to go we've got to go," said Bill Gaunt. "Seems

as though you are being a mite cold-hearted and cruel, Tess, but —Oh, all right; what must be, must be." He turned as though to go back to the cabin, then turned all the way around so as to face her again. "How far have we got to go, Tess?" he asked meekly.

"I don't care where you go or how far you go, just so you get off my land! And in a hurry, too!"

"Fair enough," said Bill Gaunt. "But look here, being as I'm more or less a stranger here, will you tell me how far I have to go to get off your land? Just where does El Capitan stop and the White Rock Ranch begin? What I mean is, where is your boundary line?"

Of course, she didn't know; not to the inch, that is; not to the foot—darn it, not to the half mile! She hadn't ever thought about boundary lines; who had? She flushed and bit her lip, but she told herself she'd be darned if she'd let this insufferable Bill Gaunt make a monkey of her again.

"Bide Kincaid!" she commanded, "don't just squat there letting this man jabber a lot of nonsense. You've got your orders; carry them out or I'll get another foreman."

"You fellers step along," said Kincaid, and now his voice took on an edge. "And step lively. I'm giving you—"

Bill Gaunt paid him not the least attention. He called out to old Jimmy Cotton,

"Hi, Jimmy, you're an old timer here; where is the north boundary line?"

"I never thought about it," muttered Jimmy Cotton. "We don't pay much attention to such things out here. I guess it's about—"

"See that big pine?" asked Bill Gaunt and pointed to the tall yellow pine across the creek, standing lofty on the rocky slope. "Ride over there and take a look at it, will you?"

"Damn you, Injun Morales!" shouted Kincaid. "You shut your trap and move along or—"

"Oh, dry up," said Bill Gaunt, and sounded disgusted with the man. "Go ahead, Jimmy, and do what I said."

Jimmy Cotton hesitated a moment, not for long. For one thing he guessed instantly what the purpose of his errand was and it flashed through the dim recesses of shadowy old memories that

somewhere or other, some time or other, he had seen a blazed pine up this way, a boundary marker. For another thing his eyes wandered to Buck Minor, and Buck gave him a quick and emphatic affirmative nod. So Jimmy Cotton spurred down to the creek. Tess Edwards called ringingly after him; what with the clatter of his horse's hoofs and then the breaking through the willows and splashing across the stream, old Jimmy Cotton could swear that he hadn't heard her.

Bill Gaunt said affably to Tess Edwards,

"I'm really interested in the line between your place and the White Rock Ranch. You see, I bought the White Rock the other day and that makes us neighbors, doesn't it? And we both ought to know just where our properties end. There have been lots of mistakes made over boundary lines, you know, and all sorts of squabbles. Why, I remember down in Texas—"

"You don't have to wait for Jimmy to come back, Kincaid," Tess cut in. "Get these men on their way."

Bill Gaunt sighed and then shrugged and turned again toward the cabin.

"Come ahead, Buck," he said, and again Tess eyed him suspiciously, so great was his apparent docility. "It's a hard, cold, cruel world, but right is right and there's a law against trespassing. Folks can be put in the jail-house for trespassing, especially if they do so intending to make trouble."

Buck Minor, following him, snorted.

"Bill Gaunt," he said in a guarded mutter, "some day Tess Edwards is going to murder you. Maybe today—and I'm double-damned if I'd blame her. When she finds out—"

And Tess was due to find out just about now. There was nothing to do now but sit her horse and watch every move that the detested Bill Gaunt made, watch him like a hawk until she saw the last of him going up over the hills and far away. Either that or turn and ride back home, leaving the present task in the hands of her men, missing the sight of Mr. Bill Gaunt's exit. So she sat and watched, and all but squirmed in the saddle, driven to fresh irritation by his leisurely movements. The man was beginning to make a bed roll, all right; but he was taking all the time in the world. Further, the brute was whistling. She even recalled the air; Pedro Morales had sung it once to his guitar:

"All the nice ladies,
They live in the calmness,
They ain't got no heart,
They ain't got no soul—"

Something like that! Oh, the insufferable Pedro Morales, the hateful Bill Gaunt!

Old Jimmy Cotton came rocketing back into camp. He spurred by Bide Kincaid and Gonzaga and reined in at Tess Edwards' side.

"Miss Tess," he said gravely and very, very slowly, "I guess maybe we've made us a mistake. That tree over yonder, well, it's a boundary marker; I remember now seeing it twenty-thirty years ago. It marks the northeast corner of El Capitan. The line runs straight west, right down yonder." He pointed. "See them two big white rocks? Runs between them and straight on." He cleared his throat. "We always counted this here cabin being on El Capitan land. Well, it ain't. It's on the rim of the White Rock Ranch."

A feeling of horror, of icy horror, stole through Tess Edwards. She didn't have to go and look at the pine; she didn't have to debate the matter with herself a split second. All she had to do was listen to old Jimmy Cotton—then look at Bill Gaunt!

Bill Gaunt had done with his pretense of making a bed roll. He had come close again, had heard every word Jimmy had had to say. Yes, all she needed was one look into the face of that loathsome devil, Bill Gaunt!

She couldn't think of a word to say.

Bill Gaunt could think of many.

"Funny how things work out," he said pleasantly. "Here we all thought I was trespassing on your land and—Why, say!" It was as though the thought only now dawned on him; he smote his thigh and laughed as though he had really just stumbled on about the funniest thing in the world. "Here I've just gone and bought the White Rock Ranch—and so I'm on my own land—and you —" He slapped his leg again and laughed more heartily than ever. "Why you're trespassing on my land! Can you tie a thing like that?"

Tom Jones made a gurgling sound. Buck Minor's face split in a grin that extended from ear to ear. Even old Jimmy Cotton snickered.

And Tess Edwards' face flamed a bright crimson. She tried to speak and for once in her life was tongue-tied. Her hands on her rifle trembled. Within herself she was saying over and over, "Oh, Bill Gaunt, I hate you. I hate you. *I hate you!*"

Aloud she didn't say a word. There was that one speechless moment, as long as a whole eternity. Then she whirled her horse, used her spurs and made the hastiest, most bitter retreat of her life. There followed her a burst of clear, bright laughter.

"Oh, I hate the brute!" sobbed Tess. "He—he—he—*Oh!*"

CHAPTER XIV

LILA made a discovery.

She lazed late in bed that morning. Some time between breakfast and the noon meal she made her way out to the kitchen in bedroom mules and negligent negligée. Hi Gee Low was out in the back yard on a bench under one of the big poplars, picking chickens for dinner. On the back of the stove was the coffee pot. Lila helped herself, dragged a chair up to the kitchen table and sat down.

Her husband kept in touch with the outside world through his newspapers; he had papers sent on to him from New York, Boston, San Francisco and Los Angeles. Hi Gee stacked the old papers up to use in starting his fires in the big wood stove. Lila, sipping her warmed over coffee, idly reached for a paper, glancing at any items that struck the eye. And it chanced that about the first news story that she saw caught and held her. It was in a paper a month old; there was a bold headline, just the sort of thing to snare her interest: NEW MILLIONAIRE OIL KING DISAPPEARS. Lila had another sip of coffee, thinking how nice it would be to be a millionaire oil king, how nice if one could just know somebody like that.

And then she saw his picture!

No more coffee for Lila that morning! The caption for the picture was, "William Gaunt Carson, Texas Oil King." And the picture was unmistakably the new Bill Gaunt whom she had seen for an instant only, the former Pedro Morales!

She couldn't believe her eyes! But then she did believe her eyes. It was Bill Gaunt, it was Pedro Morales! Daily she had brushed elbows with millions of dollars! And he was young and handsome and unmarried!

She folded the paper hurriedly and scurried to her room. There she read every line, and her eyes first grew big with excited amazement, then they narrowed in speculation. William Gaunt Carson was near by; he had been here all this time and was still tarrying not far off; Tess didn't know who or what he was and had even slapped his face! And Lila was young and pretty; though married she could easily secure a divorce— Sooner or later some girl was going to marry Bill Carson and his millions. Why not Lila?

"He's a thousand times better than Brew Hammond!" she told herself excitedly. "He is a lot richer and handsomer and—and he and Tess have just had a glorious fight! They'll hate each other like poison—he knows Tess hates me—why, just to spite her he'd start in flirting with me! And then— Just leave it to little Lila!"

She dashed into her shower, athrill with limitless expectations. She dressed swiftly, yet with care, in the niftiest riding rig she had, nodding an approving admiration in her glass. And in a handful of minutes she was ready to make a start in her new direction.

Lila saw her husband poking around down by the barn.

"Why, Ted! What on earth! Has a miracle happened? Not even a cane to lean on, either!"

Edwards looked at her a long moment in silence.

"If you'd been around more," he said drily, "or if you'd noticed more what I do, you'd have known that the last few days I've taken a short walk morning and afternoon— Which way this time, Lila?"

"Oh, just for a ride. I go wild after a while of being cooped up in that horrible old house. Well, Ted, it's splendid to see you around again."

And Lila was on her way.

Tess hadn't told her a thing about the attempted eviction of the detested Bill Gaunt and Buck Minor, in fact had made no report of the affair at home; it just wasn't an episode to be dwelt upon, a thing rather to forget as far as possible. But the ranch hands talked of it and one of them, Bide Kincaid, told the

whole story to Lila Edwards. So she knew just where to go, and on her way she pondered her campaign.

Bill Gaunt, Buck Minor and "Ugly" Ule were working on the mountain slope across the creek, where Bide Kincaid had told her they had shot off the three thunderous blasts. Bill Gaunt got a glimpse of her, dropped his pick and hurried down to camp to meet her; through the broken screen of the willows all that he could be sure of was that here came a girl visitor. He leaped, as a man will, to the conclusion to please him most: Tess, returned, of course!

"Hello, Mr. Bill Gaunt!" Lila greeted him with one of her very most provocative smiles.

He returned her greeting courteously enough if without marked enthusiasm, and wondered what brought her here.

"Oh, I knew you were here," she said gaily, seeming frank and outspoken. "One of the ranch hands told me." She laughed that special, tinklingly musical laugh of hers. "I heard how Tess bore down upon you like a wolf on the fold, and how you turned the tables on her! Very clever of you, Mr. Gaunt. And my, was Tess burned to a crisp."

He said, "Oh, yes. There was a silly mistake we made about the boundary line."

"I am afraid I was very rude to you the other day," said Lila, still as charming as she could be, which was very charming indeed. "I mean when you were with us at lunch and I didn't know we had a guest, and I came blundering in looking simply terrible! And I got panicky and ran out like—well, like a simpleton of a little school girl, I'm afraid. I simply had to come and apologize."

"That's all right, Mrs. Edwards. I didn't think a thing of it, honestly. I had quite forgotten it."

That wasn't exactly what she wanted to hear him say, but she spoke up brightly.

"That's generous of you. Mercy, if I thought you'd remember me the way I was that day! I'd been suffering from a beastly headache—I was just a rag!"

"Oh, it wasn't that bad!" was about the best Bill Gaunt could do, or anyhow the best he put himself out to do.

"Oh, it's lovely here!" cried Lila. "Will you let me peek into your cabin? Maybe you'll even offer me a cup of coffee? How I envy you an outing like this!"

"I'm afraid the cabin is altogether too messy for you to peek into," he told her, emphatic about it yet seeking to be decently affable at the same time. "We're not much good at housework up here—"

She wrinkled up her nose. "I hate housework, too!"

But he couldn't very well refuse her a cup of coffee. "It's a good idea about coffee, though," he agreed. "Just two shakes and I'll have it ready."

Nor did he even have to open the cabin door; in the open, in front of the cabin was a small sheet-iron stove which "Ugly" Ule had brought along with the explosives from Las Nueces; they preferred to use it outside than to clutter up the small already sufficiently crowded single room. He filled the coffee-pot at the creek, got a brisk fire of dead twigs and dry wood going, brought a couple of tin cups. Lila dismounted with his help; she seemed a helpless little thing up there in the saddle and put out her hands appealingly to him. He lifted her down lightly, then turned back to his stove.

She wasn't making any progress and had sense enough—or instinct enough—to realize it. She tried to size the man up when he wasn't looking at her; she kept saying over and over to herself, "Millions and millions—and living like this! And he's a handsome devil, too! Why, he could get any girl he wanted." She changed her tactics. There was a serious strain, she judged, in this man who could play the part of a half-breed horse-breaker, who thereafter could appear in a new pose, Bill Gaunt, a Texan rancher. And she felt that he was serious in whatever it was that he was doing here; that he had had some compelling reason in buying the White Rock Ranch, in dwelling here in this wretched shanty, in blasting into the mountainside. Dwelling upon all the details she had extracted from Bide Kincaid, she concluded that this Bill Carson of the many aliases, was very much in earnest about something or other. She affected to grow sober-thoughted herself.

"Bide Kincaid told me how you bought the adjoining ranch, Mr.—Mr. Gaunt," she said the final words almost with a gasp, so dangerously close had she came to calling him Mr. Carson! Whew, a narrow escape that! It was no part of her plan to have him know that she had discovered just who—*and what!*—he was! "And how you have begun—begun operations here. Of course I

don't understand about such things, really, being just a silly city girl, but I am sure it's fascinating work."

He looked at her curiously, again wondering what brought her into his camp, wishing that she'd satisfy her curiosity, if it were mere curiosity that had impelled her and would be on her inconsequential way. He replied to her remark casually.

"Nearly any work, once you tie into it, is interesting enough, isn't it? How about the coffee? Like it pretty strong? Sorry we haven't any milk."

And so it went for ten minutes or so. He was polite enough; he even smiled at some of her bright sallies; but Lila was astute enough to know that she wasn't getting anywhere. His brief remarks were purely in answer to hers; he didn't suggest any new topics, he didn't ask a single question. She was hoping that he would refer to Tess: she was all ready to tell him how of late Tess and Brew Hammond were almost inseparable. And she didn't mean to be crude enough to drag Tess into their very spotty chat by the hair of her head.

"It was terribly amusing, the way you took us all in, pretending to be Pedro Morales! You should have been an actor, Mr. Gaunt. Why, Hollywood would simply reach out and snatch you to its bosom!"

No, flattery didn't do much good either. He asked whether she took sugar in her coffee; he shrugged off the actor business and in no time at all had the broken-backed conversation turned upon the weather. The creature bored him infinitely. Lila bit her lip; she thought, The man is a fool! But he wasn't any fool. He had something on his mind, that was it; there was something very serious about all his mysterious behavior. There was too much vanity in Lila Edwards, formerly Lila Lang the stenographer, for her to accept the explanation which would have been obvious enough were that vanity of hers less.

Well, a campaign wasn't won in the initial skirmish. With Tess well out of it, with no feminine opposition, anything might happen. Lila remained outwardly bright and gay. But just before leaving she did drag Tess in by the hair of her head, after all. She said from the saddle,

"Thanks awfully, Mr. Gaunt, for the coffee. Lila is herself again now, and she must hurry along. I promised to meet Tess

who rode over to the Silver River Ranch early this morning; she ought to be homeward bound about now. Good *bye!"*

She fluttered her handkerchief at him and rode away—slowly, as she was far more graceful in the saddle with her horse at a walk than at a jolting gallop.

Bill Gaunt took up her cup and spoon, went down to the creek with them, dunked them in a pool, well anchored with a rock, to get themselves clean again, and went back up the steep slope to rejoin Buck Minor and "Ugly" Ule.

A warning shout came from Buck Minor.

"Look out, Bill! Keep back!" And then a major explosion thundered through the mountains, sending rocks and odds and ends of wilderness scenery sky-high. Bill Gaunt held back discreetly, not knowing how many blasts "Ugly" Ule had set off. The next thing he heard was another wild yell from Buck Minor.

"Bill! Bill! Come ahead! We got it! We got water pouring out'n the mountain like the Mississippi River! Look out you don't get drownded down there!"

And meanwhile Tess Edwards, instead of hobnobbing with Brewster Hammond, had been riding alone, wanting with all her heart to get away from everybody, from everything. She felt so bruised inwardly that almost her physical body ached with the pain. She swung down from the saddle under a big pine; she sat with her back to the rugged bole; she bit her lips and even gnawed a finger. She wanted to scream and to pull somebody's hair.

Whose?

Oh, she could kill that man. From the very first, there on the dusty road when he squatted on his bedroll, when he lazed against her car, when he was the first to make a fool of Tess Edwards by letting her try to talk Spanish to him—when he had made her pay him a dollar for his tinkering with her stalled car, when he had made her give him a ride to El Capitan, when he had made her give him a job! And what a job she had given him! Riding horses that were outlaws, that she knew darned well no man on earth could ride—and he had ridden them and called them nice, kind little horses! From that moment, on and on— Oh,

this intolerable, utterly despicable Pedro Morales Bill Gaunt! Ugh!

And it wasn't only Bill Gaunt; it was everything. *Everything!* She had grown to love this vast, lovely El Capitan Ranch. It was hers; her father had given it to her to have and to hold. Well, she had it; that was one thing. How about holding it? As though by evil magic, as though the devil himself had popped up from his proper abode to take a hand in affairs here on this beautiful earth, a wealth of water, the very life blood of a ranch such as this, had failed. Grass was drying. Stock went gaunt, hunting thin trickles of water. And Brew Hammond had said only yesterday, as though confident of himself, "Better marry me, Tess. I'll pull you through. I'm the only man who can. On top of that, I'm crazy about you, Tess!"

Brew Hammond! That snake in the grass, that opinionated fool, that philanderer with Lila, her father's feather-brained wife, that inconsequential nincompoop who had been battered so beautifully by the Injun Pete Morales—by the despicable Bill Gaunt. She said, "Ugh," again.

"It's a darned good word, and I feel like an Indian anyhow," said Tess to the big pine tree.

She did a good, thorough job of thinking that afternoon. Her father liked the man, and E. E. Edwards didn't give his friendship lightly and on every hand. She went back in mind to her first meeting with Pedro Morales; she couldn't help a slight twitching of her lips as she remembered. True, he had started out to plague the life out of her—but that was after she had treated him like the low-bred cross-breed that he looked. True, he had teased her from the outset. True, every small victory had gone to him. True, the thing that she hated most about him was that he had made it always so easy for her to make herself ridiculous. She recalled the roulette table in Las Nueces with him placing his bet on number four, saying so innocently that it was his sweetheart who had four letters in her name! And the way he had looked at her!

And just the other day, after she had slapped him so soundly, he had set his trap for her and had caught her in it and had made her again as mad as any Hatter! He knew so darned well how she'd react, how she would come racing to have him thrown bodily off her land! And—

All of a sudden she jumped up. Something that she had entirely forgotten came to her with a breath of sheer inspiration! That horse that he had ridden away on, clean across the boundary line, from El Capitan to the White Rock; An El Capitan horse! Now, if that didn't constitute horse stealing, what did! Oh, the boundless joy of seeing Mr. Bill Gaunt behind the bars of a snug little jail, if only for an hour!

She didn't meant to postpone a single moment the triumph which at last she was going to have! She flashed up into the saddle and rode straight to the upper end of the ranch, straight to the blessed line that separated El Capitan from White Rock! Oh, thrice blessed line! If it hadn't been there, why then Bill Gaunt, even though departing on her horse wouldn't have taken the animal off her own ranch, and it would be hard to convince judge and jury that he had actually stolen the beast. But now, he had plainly and provably conveyed the stolen property from her place to his, hiding it out in a secluded ravine! If she didn't have the law on him there was no such thing as law in the land and her name wasn't Tess Edwards!

Bill Gaunt was delighted to see her. His hat was off, his hair in wild disorder, there was a smear of black soil on his face, there was a glad, somehow victorious gleam in his eyes.

"Hello, Tess," he said warmly. "Say, but I'm glad you came. I've got some news—"

"How do you do, Mr. Gaunt," said Tess Edwards politely, with a chill and formal sort of smile, so different from Lila's. "Good news will always keep, won't it? And really I have only a minute. I dropped in, in neighborly fashion, to give you a bit of news. I have been losing some stock lately. Among other items is a saddle horse. It is one that you stole. I am having the sheriff call on you this afternoon or early tomorrow. I thought you might be interested."

"I'll tell you something, Tess Edwards—"

"I wouldn't be interested, really," said Tess sweetly. "Tell it to the judge, Mr. Gaunt."

"Dammit," said Bill Gaunt.

Actually, she thought, I've got the man losing his temper!

"It doesn't make matters any better to have you swear at me and—and threaten me, Mr. Gaunt," she said, all ice outwardly.

Before she could ride away he caught her horse's rein. Her

ice began an immediate thaw, inner fires glowing rosily through it; she even lifted her quirt. A man who had been slapped might also stand rigid with a quirt laid across his face.

"Look here, Tess!"

"Let me go, Mr. Gaunt! Don't you dare hold my horse. You—"

"Tess Edwards, how did you live long enough to grow up to be the lovely vixen that you are without having had somebody strangle you? Why weren't you strangled in your cradle?"

She started. Those, almost, were the words she had so recently flung at her father!

She groped for words. His came first.

"About your damned horse," he said. "I didn't steal it. Don't you suppose I knew that when you got around to thinking about it you would try to pin horse-stealing on me? It won't work, young trouble-maker. Your horse was turned loose, started toward home, and I'll bet your forty dollars to a nickel is right now standing in your own barn. Drag your sheriff out, show him the horse and see just what a disgusted sheriff can look like!"

Once again—Tess couldn't remember how many times this most unpleasant occurrence had made her want to shrink down to nothingness and crawl out of sight through some convenient knot-hole—she felt her face turning a fiery red. Had Bill Gaunt no other excuse for being than to torment her? She jerked angrily at the reins; her hand tightened harder than ever on her riding whip.

If he had laughed at her then she would have struck him. But he didn't laugh. He seemed calm, strangely thoughtful, and there remained that gleam in his eye. It had nothing to do with his latest triumph over her; she knew that. He had just now called her a vixen—but a lovely vixen. She wanted to blame him for something, for everything, but this time she couldn't find anything new to put at the door of all his misdeeds. And he had done a perfectly beautiful bit of work in punching Brew Hammond—and he was a friend of her dad's—and there was something likable about the brute, if only he weren't so maddening. Actually she could love him if she didn't hate him so darned much—

"Tess," he said, and seemed and sounded more serious than she had ever known him to be, "let's start all over, what do you say? We got off to a crazy start, didn't we? Suppose we play make-believe the way kids do: You and I just met, right now for

the first time. Huh? Let bygones be doggoned. Will you, Tess? I want a good talk with you. On a friendly basis, too."

He stood back, taking his hand off the reins. She hadn't laid her whip across his face; now, free to go, she did not whirl her horse and beat a swift retreat as she had done the other time. Nor did she just sit on her horse and glower. Tess Edwards was no half-way girl. She startled him, startled herself too, by beginning to laugh.

"Bill Gaunt," she said, "I could have murdered you a hundred times, both as Pete Morales and as Bill Gaunt. Somehow, all of a sudden, the murder hunger has gone out of me; too long deferred, I guess. Come right down to it, something I haven't got around to doing before, I can admit that you never tried to poison me that I know of, and never even burned my house down."

And then, being the all-the-way girl that she was, she shot out her hand toward his.

"Shake," said Tess.

They shook. She came down out of the saddle without being asked to do so, and they sat side by side on a convenient log, a very nice log, too. A log, warm and lazy in the sun, where you could sit all day.

He didn't tell her everything in the world; there were a few things he didn't know yet himself. He didn't mention Brew Hammond; too early for that yet, there being points to be made definite to himself first. He did touch on ranch affairs, told of his own recent purchase of White Rock, let her think that he had been sticking around all this while, masquerading as Pedro Morales, while he took stock of nearby ranches. Most of all he spoke of water.

"Buck Minor has told me, your father has told me," he said, "of your recent water shortage. It's like a knife in the heart of your ranch—or in its back, rather. Now if you'll come along with me, across the creek and a short climb up the mountainside. I'll show you something."

He led the way, parting the willow branches for her; he stepped into the shallow creek and, in the most matter of fact way, reached out for her, took her slender yet sweetly rounded body into his arms, and carried her across so as not to get her feet wet. If he felt her hair blowing across his face he didn't seem to

mind. He set her down and Tess, taken all by surprise, turned a gasp into a naturally sounding deep breath.

"Now look!" said Bill Gaunt.

She saw a muddy torrent that seemed to gush out of the rocky slope, then go on its mad way to spill down into the creek, a creek that ran straight down to the thirsting acres of El Capitan Ranch. A brand new torrent, she could have sworn.

She saw Buck Minor, with a pick in his grimy hands, and "Ugly" Ule leaning on his shovel, both watching the newly created cascade.

"You see," said Bill Gaunt, "I had a hunch. I caught it from Buck; he's the bright mind. We've been blasting in the likely spots and now see what we've got started!"

"Water! Out of a mountain that's pretty nearly all rock!"

"Water out of Silver Lake," said Bill Gaunt with satisfaction. And then he did mention Brewster Hammond. "Water," he said, "donated by our friend and neighbor, Brew Hammond! Without his knowing it!"

"Tell me!" cried Tess excitedly. Oh, that precious water! She did not realize that she was clutching the arm of the hateful Bill Gaunt.

"There's a lot to tell," said Bill Gaunt. "A lot to find out, too, Tess."

There was an odd, queerly disturbing note in his voice. She stared at him.

"Tell me!"

CHAPTER XV

LILA had made her discovery: Bill Gaunt was Bill Carson, and there were millions of dollars running around loose to be grabbed, could she but clutch them!

Then there was another discovery, a truly magnificent discovery, and it was made by the aforesaid Bill Gaunt along with none other than the delectable Miss Tess Edwards whom Lila had meant to leave somewhere in the dust far behind her.

But before Bill Gaunt and the delectable Tess made their dis-

covery other bright happenings strung themselves like varicolored beads along the thread of circumstance. Small happenings, each in itself, but then Gibraltar is made of atoms which in their turn, it would seem, are but the results of the congregations of what you might call, knowing no better, sub-atoms. And it is a well recorded fact that mighty oak trees do pop out of acorns not as big as your thumb.

For one thing: At table, at El Capitan ranch house, Mr. Edwards was as cheery as any cricket. He made puns about the comestibles and no man ever sank into deeper pun depths than E. E. Edwards when he let himself go. He was feeling his oats. He said that he was through with being a damfool nervous wreck. He could walk as good as any six year old and dammit, he would walk. He'd ride, too. He said.

"If I was back in New York right now I'd go out and sass the traffic cop at Broadway and Forty-second. I'd tell him he was Eyetalian."

"Oh, my *eye!*" said Tess, and the punster Ted Edwards looked at her approvingly while Lila just looked and wondered.

For another thing: At the same table, same time, Tess too was as gay as a cricket, as two crickets. She used her fork against her glass to make musical noises; she hummed a little song, not knowing that she did so. "All the nice ladies, they ain't got no heart, they ain't got no soul!" Her lips let themselves go into a smile that was a smile.

And pretty Mrs. Lila gloomed. Ted was getting well when he should have died. There would be all the bother of a divorce. And he wouldn't have a cent for her; all wasted time. Oh, what a cheat he had been! And there was that Bill Carson man with all his millions, right next door so to speak, and yet so far away. Brew Hammond? She could only shrug inwardly; Brew Hammond walked lately, she thought, like a man out on the end of a limb. What was his secret trouble? He had swept her off her willing feet, to begin with; these last few days, ever since the mysterious Pedro Morales—Bill Gaunt—Bill Carson man had pummeled him into something that looked like a residuum swept up from under a steam roller. Brew Hammond had evinced as much life and enthusiastic intention as a dead fish on the end of your line.

Then here came Brew Hammond dropping in while they were still at table, only half way through with table activities.

Tess had heard him come riding into the yard and had gone to the window to see who it was. She came and sat down with a lift of her shoulders.

"It's nobody but Brew Hammond," she said.

He was greeted courteously, that was all. Not even Lila made any fuss over him. She was too busy with her thoughts, too busy weighing him and Bill Gaunt and possibilities.

Table talk didn't amount to much. Brew Hammond was the perfect neighbor, the solicitous friend in this matter of selling to them his Silver River Ranch for which they found themselves unable to pay, a grief-stricken man because he had learned that on top of their other troubles they had to contend with this absolutely new thing, a water shortage, something that had never happened before, that was inexplicable.

Tess smiled.

"What do we care?" she asked the wide world. Then, "We win or we lose, don't we, Dad? And I'll bet you forty dollars against a nickel that we win."

Oh, life was jolly—or at least, it could be.

Tess didn't tell anyone that she and Bill Gaunt had buried the meat ax; she and Lila never had shared confidences anyhow, and as for her father she didn't intend to give him the satisfaction of knowing that she and the aforetime Pedro Morales were even on speaking terms. What she did do was this: Early one morning, dressed for riding, she went down to the bunkhouse when the men were just bestirring themselves. That means that she was up and about before the sun was. She said to her foreman,

"Bide, put a rope on Bright Angel for me. I'm going to lead him away."

Bide Kincaid gawked at her.

"Who and what's Bright Angel?" he wanted to know.

She pointed out the horse, and Kincaid looked at her in puzzled fashion. She only laughed at him and said, "Since none of you boys can ride him I'm dragging him off the ranch. Maybe I'll get him up in the hills, shoot him and have him for lunch."

Bill Gaunt, seeing her from afar, came down the trail to meet her.

"Hello, Bill," said the new Tess. "Glad to see me? You look glad. Or is it Bright Angel that makes you look like that? Any-

how, since you let the other pony go, I've brought him to you. He's yours now until death do you part. My present to you, Bill. I only wish I'd had some Christmas paper and pink ribbons to wrap him up in."

"Tess, I could love you," said Bill Gaunt.

"Why don't you try it some time, Bill?"

He loved the sound of Tess's laugh.

He showed her the water spilling out of the mountainside, a sizable stream pouring itself down into the creek which went its merry way through the small meadow and, paying no attention to ranch boundaries, scurried down to El Capitan. "Why, Bill Gaunt! Are you a magician, too?" He explained his theory: There were crevices and drifts, like tunnels they were, down deep under the mountain, leading straight here from Silver Lake; water had stored itself in underground pools, no man knew how big and deep; it had to force its way through what openings it could find on this hither side of the divide and had had its troubles filtering through the rubble of old landslides. What Bill Gaunt had done was open up holes where the springs were, letting the imprisoned waters find a ready way out, thus tending to create a vacuum within the tunnels, thus tending to increase the pressure of water in Silver Lake where Brew Hammond's hand-made landslide had plugged up the sources of the waterways. And now the water was trickling through—not the heady stream he had hoped for, but a beginning.

"And in one place," he told her, "we've opened up a cave that you could drive a herd of elephants into. That was just today. Come and I'll show you."

He led her first of all to a disappointment. Their discovery was to follow. The disappointment lay in the fact that the full gush of water had stopped; there was nothing left of its torrent but a tiny trickle that was little better than a seepage, and under his breath Bill Gaunt said damn. But there was a yawning hole in the steep slope which, as he had said, was big enough for an elephant's door.

"It makes me mad," he said. "I thought we had a young river started, and now look at the blasted thing."

"Blasted is right," giggled Tess, and it was the first time he ever heard her giggle. "And I'm glad your river has dried up;

this way we can go poking inside. I love a cave better than morning coffee and hot cakes."

"We'll do no poking inside," said Bill Gaunt forcefully. "The whole mountain would be apt to come tumbling down on us."

And so, naturally, they poked inside. First he hunted for a pitch-pine knot and made a torch of it, for the mouth of their cave was like Flaubert's door to magnificent darkness.

"I'm scared already," said the new Tess. "Even before we get started, I'm s-cared! Are you, too, Bill?"

"Maybe this is going to be our tomb," said Bill, and tried to sound gloomy. "Anyhow, I want to be with you always."

"Bill! You're not making love to me, are you?"

"I wouldn't dare. If I did you wouldn't go chaperonless into this secret place with me."

"I'd run!" laughed the new Tess, and she did run a few steps into the cavern.

"I might go back and saddle Bright Angel for you. Think of the time you'd make!"

"If I made it," laughed the new Tess.

"Remember, Miss Edwards, this cave is on my ranch, not yours. Maybe it's going to show itself up as something that's got Kentucky's hole in the ground beaten seven ways; maybe it's going to be the Great Natural Phenomenon of America—of all the western hemisphere—of the world! Yep, even of the universe! And I can put a sign up, 'Ten cents admittance'."

"I'll owe you a dime," said Tess.

The torch flared and emitted black smoke and a resinous fragrance.

"Do you know, Tess, that when you fired Buck Minor you fired the best man you will ever have on El Capitan? You played right into my hand, giving him to me. And then you promoted the scum of the earth, Bide Kincaid, to Buck's job! Were you dizzy that day, Tess?"

"Oh, Bide's all right."

"I wonder. Better watch that bird. From the impression he made on me while I was on your payroll, and from what Buck Minor has told me, it's my belief that he's a yeller dawg that would suck eggs."

"Bill! It is a cave as big as all outdoors!"

He stepped ahead, holding his smoky torch high. Underfoot was

an uneven flooring of rock with many depressions filled with water, with a thin, meandering rivulet winding out into the open, blindly headed for the creek. Overhead, high enough so that they did not have at any spot to stoop, was a roof of solid stone. Ahead of them extended black mystery.

They went on for fifty feet, a hundred feet. The place was enormous, but just as they began to feel that it would extend indefinitely it seemed all of a sudden to come to an end. On both sides and in front of them they saw only the solid walls of rock.

"But it must go on somewhere," said Tess. "Where did the water get through? And the air in here is almost as fresh as the outside air."

They explored in what light Bill Gaunt's torch afforded, and presently found an opening, low down in the rock wall, as big as the mouth of a fireplace. Through this opening ran the thin trickle of water. They got down on their knees and peered into a jet-black void.

"You wait here," he said. "I'm going to crawl a little way into this old drain pipe and see what I can see."

"You'll need eyes like a cat's to see anything," said Tess, and after he had crawled a dozen feet or so she crawled along, very silent about it, after him.

The tunnel curved and twisted, narrowed so that the girl felt that the mountain was slowly, steadily pressing in upon her, bent on trapping her, squeezing her to death. The panicky thought came, What if a loose rock somewhere up above drops right behind us and we can't get out! The pine torch grew dim; she could scarcely see it at times she lost it altogether; its smoke lay heavy upon the still air.

"Bill!" she called, not loudly; but an eerie company of echoes started up and shouted his name.

His voice came booming back to her.

"Tess! I told you—"

"I don't care! I had to come, too. But let's go back." She laughed and listened, breathless, to her laughter flung back at her. "Bill! I can't even turn around! I've got to crawl backwards—Bill, I *am* scared. Good and plenty."

"Me, too," said Bill's booming voice. "Let's back up and get out of here. I think there are devils ahead of us, just around the next corner. And I want to see what sunlight looks like."

Once more on the mountain slope with a fresh breeze in their hair and the gold of the sunshine flooding them, they looked at each other and laughed.

"You know, Tess," said Bill Gaunt, "I'm going back in there. I'll get Buck Minor or 'Ugly' Ule to come along. We'll have lanterns; I'll drag some dry wood into the main cave and have a fire that will give us light and start a draft going. I've got to see how far that tunnel goes—if it keeps on, big enough for a man to wriggle through, all the way to Silver Lake. If it does— Well, we'll get our water back, that's all."

"We are very near the border line, Mr. Gaunt," said Tess, and nibbled reflectively at a blade of grass. "And I noticed how our tunnel-cave makes a decided twist sideways, toward El Capitan. It is my confirmed belief, my dear sir, that the crooked old cave is anyhow half mine!"

"And so—"

"—when you and Buck Minor with all your lanterns and dry wood go exploring I am going along. If there ever was a well established fact, that's it."

He grinned at her. "We'll leave Buck out of it for the moment. I'll go get the lanterns and some wood—"

"I'll carry the lanterns, that way you can carry about twice as much wood. I'm not scared any longer. And—"

"Let me look at you, Tess Edwards!"

She looked at him, her chin lifted, her lips parted, her eyes laughing. Laughing eyes, teasing eyes, daring eyes, eyes of unfathomable, mysterious depths.

He knew then what he had suspected more than once: he loved the girl. He loved her and wanted her and meant to have her. He took a swift step toward her—

And Tess, as nimble as a deer, a Tess who knew full well what her eyes had been talking to him about, ducked and dodged and was well out of his way—laughing.

"Lanterns and wood, Mr. Gaunt," she said. "Shall we also take a keg of water, some sea biscuits and a barrel of rum?"

She carried the lanterns and gathered pine cones; they built a blazing, light-giving fire in the front cave. Each carrying a lighted lantern, Bill Gaunt dragging after him an armful of faggots snared in the noose of a rope, they again crawled into the winding, narrow tunnel. This time, escorted by light and making their way

along a remembered path, they did not find the place so threateningly tomb-like.

"Tess!" His voice came thundering back to her.

"You don't have to yell at me as though I were deaf!" And her voice echoed inordinately loudly. They both laughed; it was as though forty people laughed.

"See how fast you can crawl! Only be careful not to knock your brains out just before you get here."

"What have you found?"

"Come and see it!"

"It's like a squirrel hole—"

"It's like a cathedral!"

When she came to where he was awaiting her he was standing straight. She stood at his side and they lifted their lanterns. Out of the fearfully narrow tunnel they had come into the vastest cavern either of them had ever seen; the rays of their lanterns showed them no encroaching rock walls, no roof of rock above. They felt rather than saw the enormousness of the place. The air was cold, not overly damp, sufficiently fresh.

"The whole mountain is hollow!" gasped Tess.

"I'll get a fire going; that will give up more light."

But with his pine wood blazing and both lantern wicks turned high, they still lacked the light they wanted. They went forward, exploring as best they could. Now and then they saw side walls, spectral and wan, now and again knobs of whitish rock overhead. Across the floor of the place ran the thin stream of water glinting faintly in the lantern light. They kept close to this stream which in places followed a groove they could step across, in other places widened out into shallow pools.

"Look!" exclaimed Tess. "A lake, as sure as you are born! A lake right here inside a mountain!"

It was a wide, still pool, oval in shape, fifty yards long or longer, more than half that in width and of unguessed depth. The water trickled in at the far end, trickled out over the lower rim, and scarcely disturbed the surface.

"Now, where did *that* come from?" said Tess, and pointed.

It was a man's hat. Originally it had been white, now it was pale, mottled pinkish color; that was because it had been water soaked and had left the hat factory with a gay ribbon, red and white about it. A sort of sickish pink now. It had obviously come

into this cavernous place along with the water from Silver Lake; by chance it had got itself nicely hung up on a prong of rock at the edge of the big pool.

"Why don't you say something?" said Tess. "It's funny to find a hat here. How in the world do you suppose— Why do you look like that!"

She stopped short. There was light enough for her to see Bill Gaunt's face; it had grown so stern all of a sudden that he frightened her. His lips were tightly compressed, his jaws locked, his eyes narrowed and hard.

"I know that hat! I think I know now, for sure, what happened to Harry Morton!"

"Bill! You give me the creeps!"

Bill Gaunt went hurriedly to pick up the hat. He stood, slowly turning it in his hands. His face frightened her more than ever.

CHAPTER XVI

THEN Lila came again, as pretty as a peach, to impress Mr. Bill Gaunt. And Bill Gaunt, far away from her in all his thoughts, strove again to be courteous but made it very shiningly clear to the young lady that he had not the least interest in her charms. And the rather silly yet somewhat astute Lila saw a gauntlet on the ground near his cabin and recognized it: It was one that Tess had dropped.

Lila's small white teeth shut down hard. She smiled her way lightly out of his camp; she rode slowly and thoughtfully home. So Tess was playing around with Bill Gaunt, was she? Well, Lila might fix that. Also Lila might pick up where she had left off, and drop in for a chat with Brew Hammond. With Millionaire Bill Carson impervious to her darts, Brew Hammond was a good second—and Lila said to her secret self that she would be damned before she'd ever go back to steno and typing.

Returning to ranch headquarters she saw her husband sliding down out of his saddle; he had been going places on horseback! The old devil would never die, nor would he support her in af-

fluence. She showed her teeth to him; Lila thought that it would pass for a smile.

She went singing into the house. "House," she said, "I hate you and you know it!" She went on, singing, into her room.

She brushed by Tess.

"Hello, Tess darling," she said. And then, not to be too precipitate, she kept her pretty mouth shut. And this was in defiance of all the urges she had to contend with. She wanted to say so many things, and right away.

She still had the newspaper with a picture of Bill Carson, Texas millionaire. Oil King, they called him. She tossed it—tossed it carefully and then rearranged it—on the foot of her bed. She went in to bathe after her ride. She was still singing.

She heard, since she kept her pretty ears wide open, Tess come into her room. Lila, still in the bath, called cheerily:

"Oh, Tess. You're just in time. I'm in the tub, and where is any soap?"

So Tess came, looking for the soap. There wasn't any.

"Oh, silly little ninny that I am," said Lila. "I left it in my bedroom. If you'll get it, Tessie dear, some day I'll buy you a hat with a feather."

There was no chance to miss that newspaper spread all over the southern end of the bed; there was Bill Gaunt, as natural as life. Only the caption was, "Bill Carson, Oil King."

"Hm," said Tess, and sat down to read.

Presently, "Where's my soap, Tess, dear?"

"I fell into your trap, Lila darling. I'm reading the paper you put here for me."

"Why, Tess!"

But Tess didn't pay her any attention; she read the whole story through, every word of it. So. Don Pedro Morales, the more than half Indian, was Bill Gaunt, the mysterious stranger, and Bill Gaunt was William Gaunt Carson, a man of millions who had made a monkey of her, breaking horses for forty dollars a month! Taking a one dollar tip!

"And he has done nothing but laugh at me up his sleeve all the time! Me, down to my last dollar, with the ranch going into the ditch! him, with his greasy millions, taking Tess for a ride! Oh, I hate that brute! I hope he chokes this very day. I hope he breaks both legs, then his neck and—and—Oh!"

"Soap, dearie," called Lila mellifluously.

"I tell you I'm reading your filthy paper!"

"Why, Tess, didn't Bill tell you? He was going to. He told me yesterday—"

"Shut up," said Tess.

"He said that it was fun, with a new few millions in his jeans, to run out on the whole works, and have himself a time with folks like you and me. He said he got the biggest laugh of a whole lifetime, breaking horses for you. Say, Tess, if I was in a marrying mood I might marry that gink. He's daffy, but he's fun. Why don't you make a try for him, Tessie? You might get away with it, there being so darned few women out in this neck of the woods, as the old timers would put it."

Tess didn't even say "Shut up!" this time. She was thinking.

And so was Bill Gaunt Carson thinking. He had a talk with Buck Minor, a talk all about himself and Harry Morton and Brewster Hammond. He said,

"I found Harry's hat, Buck. Harry was supposed to be down in Mexico, on his way to South America. What happened was this, and I know it: For the sake of a dirty ten thousand bucks Brew Hammond knocked him off. Somehow that Albuquerque bird, Steve Quinton, knew about it. He blackmailed Hammond, and Hammond killed him."

"Let's go get our guns," said Buck, a man of straight shooting logic.

"Only we've got to be sure."

"Like hell we do. Hammond ought to be eradicated anyhow. Just on general principles."

"How come I found Harry's hat hanging on a jagged rock in the cave? Where is what's left of Harry?"

"Maybe in the cave, too," said Buck, pondering the matter. "A man generally, dead or alive, keeps track of his hat."

"Buck, I've got two things riding me. One is, what happened to Harry Morton. The other is, how do we put the water back on El Capitan."

"And number three," said Buck Minor, "is how do we get the low-down on Brew Hammond, and make him something that ain't any more, but just used to be. Right, kid?"

"I think maybe you're right," said Bill Gaunt.

Buck had said, "A man generally keeps track of his hat." Bill said, "See that our lanterns are filled, kid. Me, I'll go get us some pine wood that will make more light than smoke. I'll show you a cave that is a cave."

"And maybe," grumbled Buck Minor, "the water'll break through at the upper end, up at Silver Lake, and we'll drown like two rats in a sewer pipe."

"One rat, and me," snorted Bill Gaunt. And Buck Minor got it and laughed.

Bill Gaunt used Buck's ax, and cut a long pole down at the creek, the slender limb of an aspen. He trimmed off the small branches and leaves.

"Going fishing?" said Buck. And Bill Gaunt, a grim-looking man, said, "Yes."

They went through the first cave; they crept through the long tunnel; they came into the cathedral cavern where Bill Gaunt and the new Tess had found a hat. And Bill Gaunt began trying out the big pool with his fishing rod.

"What in hell are you doing?" demanded Buck Minor.

Bill Gaunt knew that Harry Morton, who had failed to show up down Mexico way, was dead. He knew that Brew Hammond had killed him. Just for ten thousand dollars. Well, there were men who would knock a man off for a tenth of that sum—for half that tenth. But, he figured it out, Brew Hammond must have been pretty hard ridden before he would come down to murder for the sake of ten thousand.

"Dammit, Buck—"

"Now what?" said Buck Minor.

"Now we go on," said Bill Gaunt. "We'll see what we can see."

"It's darker than Billy-be-damed in here. And we've got to the end of your cave anyway."

But, as Bill Gaunt knew there had to be, there was still another opening, a sort of tunnel where the big cathedral of a cave ended. The water came through, didn't it? Well, then, with luck a man could go through.

They found another tunnel of sorts, a perpendicular rift in the rock, high enough so that a tall man did not have to stoop, so narrow that a fat man would have found it hard to get through, narrow enough even for Bill Gaunt and Buck Minor, both spare men. This crevice angled to right, to left, ran straight a hundred

yards or so and angled again. Then they came into the third cave, and always under foot was the thin trickle of water.

And all the while Bill Gaunt was thinking of Harry Morton's straw hat, of Harry Morton. He didn't want to stumble upon Harry's body; it was unthinkable—yet all the while he kept looking for it.

"Seems as though," said Buck Minor, "we've crept along a mile or more. Dammit, Bill, we can't be far away from Silver Lake. And if it does bust through—"

"It's going to," said Bill Gaunt. "We might as well go back. Buck. We need 'Ugly' Ule and his dynamite. He can tie on a fuse as long as he wants; we'll blow all hell out of Brew Hammond's lake; we'll get the water back and maybe—"

"Kind of liked this guy Harry Morton, didn't you?" said Buck "Going back now, are you?"

"We'll go on a bit farther. It might be that—"

He didn't finish, but Buck knew what he meant: It might be that they would find what Bill Gaunt did not want to find, yet was looking for.

There were pools, and they stopped at every one, and Bill Gaunt prodded with his pole. They passed through a string of small caves, all water-worn, connected by the tunnel-like passages which for centuries had let the water come through from Silver Lake. There was always that small rivulet, at times narrowed in a groove, at other times spreading out, an inch deep over the rocky floor.

"Dammit," said Buck, "If a man's hat got this far—"

"Shut up," said Bill Gaunt, and kept on questing. Then they came to a dead end; a wall of broken boulders and general rubble with even torn fragments of trees and dirt and brush, stopped them; through this barricade, evidently of recent origin, the small stream seeped slowly.

"And right there," said Bill Gaunt, "is the lake. I bet you a dollar. Here's the job for 'Ugly' Ule to do."

"And he better run like hell," said Buck Minor.

Back at camp a mild surprise awaited Bill Gaunt. Awaited Bill Gaunt Carson, rather. There was Tess's father, looking proud of himself on horseback.

"Shucks, Bill," he said, "I've got this pizzling sickness of mine

beat to a frazzle. I'm up and around, and don't let any man tell you different. Hi, Buck!" he added as Buck Minor showed up.

"Howdy, Mr. Edwards," said Buck.

"Ted, old boy, it's sort of good to see you staggering around under your own power," said Bill Gaunt.

"Let's go squat on a log, Bill. We'll talk about the weather and things."

So they sat on a log in the sunshine and had their cigarettes and, after a while, talked.

"You know, Bill, Lila is a mighty nice girl." Edwards had to stop and clear his throat. "You know, Bill, she's not used to living out in the wilds like this. I guess I ought to be shot, an old man like me, marrying a lovely young girl like her. I guess I didn't give the kid a break, Bill."

Bill didn't say a word. He knew how it was with Ted Edwards. Edwards didn't want to say anything in the least disparaging about Lila Edwards; he had a whole lot less than no use for the woman, but she was his wife and there was a marked *noblesse-oblige* strain in him. Yet he had his piece to speak. He cleared his throat again.

"You see Bill—Oh, hell! Lila got wise to who you are. She found an old newspaper with your picture in it. She found out that you were Bill Carson from down Texas way, and that you were as rich as grease is. I think she came out to see you a couple of times. Dammit, my throat bothers me; some new disease I'm catching, I suppose. Once a man gets down on his back—Let's see; where were we?"

Bill Gaunt didn't say anything; he just waited.

"Oh, yes. She told Tess. She told Tess that you were a multi-millionaire or something like that, and she laughed; dammit, I heard her laughing. Well, maybe it was funny. Maybe not. I couldn't tell. All I know is that Tess got mad. Good and mad. She sized it up this way: You'd made a monkey out of her, pretending to be Injun Pete Morales; then you came back and fooled her again, being Bill Gaunt. And all the time you're Bill Carson, taking her forty dollars a month pay when your pockets are lined with gold, greasy with oil. I tell you it made her mad!"

Bill Carson nodded. "Yes, I can see that," he conceded.

He called to Buck Minor.

"Come over here, Buck, and squat on a log with us. There's plenty room. I'm going to talk. You might just as well listen."

Buck came over and sat on the end of the log.

"Me," said Bill Carson, "I'm Bill Carson. You can forget the other names. Ted Edwards here knows about me; it's just my low-down luck that for the first time in my life I'm as rich as grease. They dug for oil down at my place, and dammit, they found it. Oil all over the ranch. So I dug out. If you want to borrow a few dollars, Buck, something like a hundred thousand silver fish, just tell me."

Buck Minor finished making his cigarette and his hands were steady.

"Mean it, Bill?" he said.

"I mean it."

"Well then, suppose you lend me ten bucks right now."

Bill Carson stood up, pulled his shirt up and got to his money belt. He opened one of the pockets and brought forth a tight little wad of yellowbacks; the smallest denomination was five hundred dollars.

"I can't make change, Buck. Here's five hundred. See that you give me back exactly four hundred and ninety dollars."

Like Ted Edwards before him, Buck Minor had throat trouble. Finally he said,

"Thanks a lot, Bill. I'll go get my horse. Seems as though I'm going to town."

"Remember what I told you: Keep your mouth shut."

"Sez you," snorted Buck Minor.

"And keep your shirt on a minute, will you? Ted and I are talking things over. You can spread your ears all you want, just so you keep your trap tightened up." Buck settled back; Bill Carson spoke to Edwards. He said, "Ted, I'll tell you. I bought the Silver Lake Ranch from Brewster Hammond. A friend of mine did all the dickering. He gave Hammond ten thousand dollars to tie the deal up. And this friend of mine has never showed up since. Happens that I'd bet my shirt that Hammond took the ten thousand, then killed Harry Morton. Got it?"

"I see what you mean, Bill, but it's sort of hard to take." Edwards pulled at his lower lip. "Brew Hammond may be, and probably is, a low down dog. But I can't quite see him as a murderer."

"Somebody shot Steve Quinton in the back. Not that Steve didn't have it coming to him. But from behind? A dirty trick, Ted. And although I didn't see Brew Hammond do the job, I know damned well that he did. He tried to bump me off, too. And that was all because, unless I miss my bet, Steve Quinton knew that Hammond had killed Harry Morton."

"You're just guessing, Bill."

"I found Harry's hat in a cave, inside the mountain next door. Tess and I found it. Tell me, how come he'd gone off and left his hat? And keep in mind that I bought Silver Lake from Hammond, and then on top of it Hammond sold the same ranch to Tess. What does that make Brew Hammond?"

Buck Minor, though commanded to keep his mouth shut, spoke up.

"Hammond's lost the hell of a lot of money, lately, Bill," he said. "Over to Las Nueces. That gambling joint of his most generally turns him in a nice bundle of kale, but even percentages go sour once in a while. He got took for a ride not so long ago by some bright boys from the south. The old ladies are telling the story over their tea tables, you know, playin' bridge and talking fast, as how he got trimmed for somewhere between fifty and a hundred thousand. That's money, kid, in anybody's book."

Edwards said, "Hm," and Bill Carson looked thoughtful.

"I'm still looking for Harry," said Carson. "His hat must have come through from Silver Lake. Maybe— Oh, hell, maybe he came through too."

Edwards looked more thoughtful than ever.

"Let me come along, Bill. I can navigate first rate these days. I'd like to see your cave anyhow."

"Me, too," said Buck Minor. "I've seen it already, Mr. Edwards, but I'm beginning to think that Bill is right. And I'm in no hurry to go spend my new pocketful of money."

"Fork your pony and get going to town, Buck. Do this for me: You don't like roulette, but I do. Put down a hundred bucks on number four. Then do it again; that makes two hundred. Then, once more; three hundred strung along like that on number four. You can stuff the winnings into your pocket to bring back to me. You'll still have a couple of hundred to drop at faro. Then come back sort of half way sober. And when in town, keep that trap of yours closed, else, so help me, I'll kill you."

Buck Minor took his orders and departed with a considerable display of alacrity.

"You're a crazy hound dog," grinned Edwards.

"You too, kid. Before we get through though— Aw, shucks, Ted, you and me are going to come out on top. The only thing that gets me down, though, Ted, is that that lovely daughter of yours is sore at me. You know, Ted—and here's a secret—I'm going to marry that girl. She doesn't know it yet; don't you tell her; but that's what's going to happen. And you? Going to try to block me?"

"Tess is full grown," said Ted Edwards. "Likewise she's the hell of a fine kid. Nobody's ever got away with marrying her yet. If you can do it—well, you can call me pappy."

They grinned at each other.

Had Tess been there she would have slapped both their faces.

CHAPTER XVII

And Buck Minor stormed into town with his five hundred dollars and a singing heart. He bought a ten-gallon hat, then acquired a pair of boots that gave him and the shoe man a degree of trouble getting on Buck's feet. He cocked his hat back at an angle and walked on his new boot heels as far as the Ace High. His pockets were full of money; at the store there had been trouble breaking his five hundred dollar yellowback. He had more greenbacks and coins than, as Buck put it, would patch hell a mile.

"Roulette!" he snorted. "A game for fools and ladies." So he had his first drink, then the second and after that the third. He sat at the faro table. And out of the corner of his eye he saw Brew Hammond.

"I owe him a licking," said Buck. "Last time Bill did it for me. I'd sort of like to do my own business this trip."

He played faro with aplomb and no final success. True, for a time he was in the money; his first hundred dollars brought him two hundred. He sat with a bottle at his elbow and a large smile on his face.

"Tonight's my night to howl," said Buck Minor.

But he did his howling prematurely. His initial hundred and the other hundred which joined it faded away like a thin springtime mist before a glad, golden sun.

"That's all right," said Buck to his bottle. "Only a hundred bones gone away, and here's the lucky hundred."

The hundred was lucky, but not for Buck Minor. The dealer took it in. He said companionably, "Where do you get all that money, Buck? Been robbing a bank or what?"

"It's just what," said Buck. "Besides, I don't like faro. My game's roulette."

He saw Brew Hammond again; Hammond was looking at his watch. Buck brushed by him and took his whirl at roulette.

"A hundred bones on number four," he said after the little ivory ball had started spinning merrily on its track. "And I'd sort of like to win."

The croupier smiled as he raked in the hundred dollars.

"Some other day, maybe, kid," he said genially.

"No," said Bill. He had brought his bottle along and drank deep. "Tonight. Now. I got a hundred bucks that says number four comes up."

Number eighteen came up and Buck grunted disgustedly. He confided to the dealer, "Any man, woman or child that plays this game ought to be fed to the hawgs. Here's another hundred on four, young feller."

"The faster they go the quicker I get 'em," said the dealer.

Number four came up. Buck looked and stared. Number four came up. There was no saying that it didn't. Number four came up! Thirty-five hundred dollars for Buck Minor, on top of his hundred dollar bet! He raked in his chips.

"Nice little game, roulette," he said to his bottle, and the two of them got together again. "I don't know what to do with so much money," he said sadly to the dealer.

"Number four was kind of good to you, kid."

"That's so," Buck had to admit. "And Bill, he told me to play it three times." He looked as wise as an owl. "A hundred on number four," he said.

He almost fell over backwards. For number four, Bill Carson's mystic number, repeated. Buck Minor, who had never seen so much money, had dragged down seven thousand dollars in two plays.

"Nice little game," he said mildly. "For them that likes it, it's a dandy game. Me, I don't care so much for it. Guess I'll quit."

He carried his chips over to the cashier's cage. Seven thousand lovely dollars. He saw Brew Hammond watching him; Hammond's eyes looked like stones. Buck thought, That was just about as good as busting him one in the nose. He got his wad of bills, counting them carefully. Seven thousand dollars. He began to laugh. He went back for his bottle.

"I think red is coming up this trip," said Buck to his bottle. "If we plunk down seven thousand on red and red does come up, then we can take back fourteen thousand to poor old Bill. Bill maybe could use it. And anyhow it would make Brew Hammond awful mad."

Yes, Buck had to laugh. The cashier, paying him for his chips, had been momentarily embarrassed; in fact he had to step across the room for a conference with Hammond, then along with Hammond to the Ace High safe. It was funny all right.

"Now when I plunk down the whole works on the red—I wonder, though! Maybe black is coming up! Then Hammond would do all the laughing! Maybe number four is good once more!" He had a drink. "If I plunked down seven thousand on number four, and it came good—that would be thirty-five times seven thousand—Aw, shucks."

He walked over to the bar and set his bottle down. Then he stepped daintily in his new boots to where Hammond, not looking in the least cheery, was speaking in quick, sawed-off words to the roulette dealer.

"Mr. Hammond," said Buck Minor politely, "you are a louse."

Brew Hammond crooked his finger and two of his henchmen, bouncers by title, stepped forward briskly.

"This bum is drunk," said Hammond. "Throw him out."

But Buck wasn't drunk. Exhilarated, yes; eager and fervid, to be sure. Quite ready, however, to cope with ordinary circumstances.

"Out you go, feller," said one of Hammond's brawny bouncers. "Want to go quiet, or get your block knocked off?"

"I'm feeling pretty good tonight," said Buck pleasantly. "If you aim to chuck me out you better go get the rest of the help to back you boys up; you'll need it."

A strong hand reached out and caught him by the shoulder.

Buck Minor swung with his right fist and, largely through luck—and wasn't he lucky tonight!—landed with such effect on the bouncer's chin that that man went down like something that had been crowned with a sledge hammer. Buck beamed. Bouncer Number One was down; there remained, fortunately, Bouncer Number Two. A young stalwart, as husky as a truck, lively on his feet, too, and with considerable fistic knowledge. Well, just too bad. Buck Minor had proclaimed that it was his night to howl. And howl he did. He came slashing up with his right again and again Lady Luck smiled over his shoulder. Two good, forthright blows, two hapless bouncers down on the floor.

Buck Minor kept on beaming. He said the second time to Brew Hammond,

"Mr. Hammond, you're a louse."

Then his grin spread all over his face.

"Two down, and only one to go. Mr. Hammond. Take this one!"

Brew Hammond looked at the two men so nicely spilled on the floor. He said,

"Buck, you're drunk and cantankerous. You better get out of here while the going is good."

"I'll tell you something," said Buck. "A sort of a secret it is, between me and Bill. Bill is Pedro Morales who knocked hell out of you once and will do it again. Likewise, he's the man that staked me tonight, and I rode you high, for a good seven thousand bucks, which made you mad. On top of that he is nobody else but Bill Carson, who owns most of Texas nowadays, and who is up here to get your shirt. Got it, Mr. Hammond?"

Hammond went as white as a sheet. So Pedro Morales, hiding behind his whiskers, was Bill Carson, Harry Morton's friend, Bill Carson, masquerading, suspecting things. Bill Carson whose ten thousand dollars, via Harry Morton, had sort of kept things going for Brewster Hammond. Bill Carson, damn him!

Brew Hammond thought swiftly and came up with a lusty right to Buck Minor's chin. But Buck wasn't as drunk as he had been that other time. He moved out of the line of destruction and grinned. Then Buck brought up his own right hand. Right fist, rather. And it landed just where he wanted it to land.

Hammond went down, flat on his back, like a man who had run up against a bolt of lightning. But Buck Minor jerked back

as though he and not Hammond had received the walloping blow. He saw Bill Carson standing there, listening, looking at him.

"Buck," said Bill Carson, "I heard you. I told you to keep your mouth shut. You could be a decent kid if you worked hard on it. It just happens, though, that you are a rat. Me. I'm through with you."

Buck's laugh didn't make pretty music. He said,

"Bill, you don't own me. Nobody does, but me. You're two rats, the way I see you."

Three men were on the floor, all Buck Minor's doing. Bill Carson stepped closer and landed on Buck's nose. Buck went staggering back, toppling, falling—only he didn't quite fall. The wall saved him. Then he came tearing back at Bill Carson, and made a war club out of his clenched hand. Much to Bill Carson's surprise he became the fourth man down.

And Buck Minor's laugh this time did make pretty music.

"Bring 'em on!" said Buck gleefully. "Me. I'm howling tonight. I need some more ten pins to knock over. Can you get up, Bill? Can you take the rest of what's coming to you?"

Bill Carson laboriously got on his hands and knees. He felt like a man under a landslide. He was dizzy; the floor under his uncertain feet seemed to be going in circles. Just the same he would put Buck Minor where he belonged—

But Buck Minor was fairly dancing on his toes; so much victory had gone to his head, then to his feet. Bill Carson tore into him—and with a lucky blow Buck knocked him as flat as a pancake. For a moment Bill Carson lay quietly where he was. He had to do a bit of thinking.

Hammond's two bouncers got up. Hammond, too, after a moment, got up. Bill Carson slowly arose from his sitting posture.

Buck Minor regarded them all scowlingly.

"Only four of you bums?" he said, and sounded mournful. "Better go out and get another four to back you up. This is my night, fellers. And Mr. Hammond is a louse. I said it and I mean it."

"I agree with you on that, Buck," said Bill Carson. "But just now, leaving Hammond out of it, I've got a notion that I'm going to beat the merry hell out of you. Hammond can come later."

"See if you can do it," said Buck.

He had no grievance against Bill. Bill, so far as Buck knew

him, was all right. But it seemed as though he had a job of work to do, to knock out any man or gang of men that got in his way. He blew on his knuckles—just for luck.

Hammond, looking on, enjoyed the battle. Here were two men for whom he had less than no use trying to batter each other into pulp; no matter which one lost, Hammond won. For him it was a very pleasant program.

Bill Carson, hot all the way through, cording with anxious battle muscles, struck Buck Minor three times, three lightining blows, chin, cheek bone and throat. Buck flopped over on his back.

And Brew Hammond could not resist the temptation; his boot crashed into the fallen man's ribs.

"You dirty dog!" Bill Carson called him, seeing Buck writhe on the floor. "This for you!"

He threw his weight along with his blow, and again Hammond went to the floor.

But there were his two bouncers still to contend with. They gathered themselves for the onslaught.

Onlookers gathered in a wide ring about them, taking in the spectacle with the semi-detached yet warm pleasure of spectators at a dramatic play. Mentally they were placing their bets.

Hammond dragged out a gun from under his arm pit. His eyes were red, bloodshot and wicked. He wanted a kill.

Buck Minor whipped out his gun. Murder hovered over the small group. Any man might get a bullet between the eyebrows in less than no time, as they expressed themselves in those days. They were all expectant.

Bill Carson didn't want just then to kill, and he didn't want to be killed at any time. He whipped his gun down on Brew Hammond's wrist; he came close to breaking Hammond's arm.

Hammond's gun fell to the floor. Bill Carson said, "No shooting in a scrimmage like this, Hammond. If you want it later, just come along and say so."

"Let's go get 'em, Bill," said Buck Minor.

And Bill Carson said, "That's an idea, Buck. Let's do it."

They still talk about the fight that night at the Ace High. It wasn't just a common bar-room brawl; there was a certain largeness of purpose about it that amounted almost to dignity. Bill Carson and Buck Minor, who had just done their best to knock

the daylights out of each other, now tied into the trio of Messrs. Hammond and Bouncers.

At the outset things did not go too well for Messrs. Bill Carson and Buck Minor. Buck, though not drunk, was feeling high; he was walking high, wide and handsome. He came up with a noble blow, dragging it upward from down about his boot tops, meaning to deliver it to Mr. Hammond, and made a slight error; instead of landing on Hammond's jaw he caught Bill Carson on the temple and not only surprised both Bill and himself, their adversaries no less, but sent Bill reeling backward so that he came close to falling.

"Why, Buck, you — —!" he shouted when he got his legs steady under him. The rest he said with his fist as he tore into Buck Minor.

And here was a situation that could not but have filled with joy the hearts of Brew Hammond and his two bouncers, Jarboe and Kildoon; here was an inivtation to a general scrimmage, no holds barred. In two shakes the battle became one of the most satisfying—to the onlookers and perhaps to the participants themselves!—free-for-all combats that the old Ace High had ever witnessed.

One cannot but be forcefully reminded of those lovely lyric lines concerning the two cats who found themselves in an argument:

> "There were two cats of Kilkenny;
> Each cat thought there was one cat too many:
> So they scratch and they spit
> And they fought and they bit,
> Till, excepting their nails
> And the tips of their tails,
> Instead of two cats there weren't any."

For a moment or so, out of the tornadic whirlwind on the middle of the bar-room floor, one felt that those five men had no object in life but to batter themselves indiscriminately into insensibility.

Out of the din rose Buck Minor's voice in an angry roar:

"Bill, you big fool, I didn't go to hit you! Lay off me, or I'll murder you!"

Already the fact of Buck's error, made in his enthusiasm, had begun to suggest itself to Bill Carson. In any reason there was no real great trouble between the two, certainly none that could not be postponed. And here were other matters requiring immediate attention. Bill Carson grinned.

"Fair enough, Buck," he sang out. "Now let's finish up our little job of work."

Hammond's gun, still on the floor, was kicked, slithering along the bare planks, by one of the contenders. Hammond, though his right arm was numb, stooped and reached for the gun.

"So you want to get ugly, do you?" snorted Buck Minor, and from behind delivered to Brew Hammond so lusty a kick that Hammond shot forward, unbalanced, and spilled on his face. He strove to rise; Buck was the first to lay hand on Hammond's gun. With a little grunt of mingled effort and joy he brought the heavy barrel down on the back of Hammond's head, and to all intents and purposes Brew Hammond went to sleep.

As Buck swung about he threw the gun away and doubled his fist to resume operations upon Messrs. Jarboe and Kildoon, just in time to see that he had made yet another strategic error. For the two bouncers, already looking pretty well battered, had emulated their employer and had reached for their guns, holstered under the arm pits.

"Go to it if you think it'll do you any good," said Bill Carson.

And Buck saw that Bill Carson's speed was vastly greater than that of Jarboe and Kildoon, and Bill was ready to shoot before the others could even drag their weapons clear of their leathers. The two slowly, scowlingly, brought their hands out empty.

"It's been a pleasant evening," said Bill Carson to Buck Minor, and stowed away his own weapon. "How about a little drink?" Then, as an afterthought, he said to the Ace High strong-arm men, "You two care to join us?"

It appeared that neither Jarboe nor Kildoon were inclined to be gracious; they merely busied themselves with gathering up their fallen chief and carrying him to an adjoining room marked *Private.*

CHAPTER XVIII

BILL CARSON and Buck Minor stood companionably together against the Ace High bar and downed their drinks with a brief, "How." Then each man reached for his tobacco and papers.

"You're fired, Buck, like I told you," said Bill Carson.

"Suits me fine," said Buck. "Another drink, Bill?"

"Well, maybe. A square dance like the one we just had makes a man feel dry inside. Ever notice?"

"Here's how!" said Buck the second time.

"How. And so long, Buck."

"Wait a shake, can't you? There's a couple of questions I got to ask you before our trails fork for good and all. Number one question: How about that money you staked me to today? If there's anything left over—"

"Give me back my three hundred, you keep the two hundred and I said you could play at faro."

Buck Minor scratched his chin and appeared as thoughtful as a school kid trying to figure out a tough problem in arithmetic.

"Let's see," he said. "Let's see how it goes—"

"You mean you've gambled it all away already! Man, you and a fistful of money!"

"Well, not exactly. But it seems only fair to me that as long as you've tied the tin can to my tail, there ain't any business transactions anymore betwixt the two of us. And—"

Bill Carson's eyes narrowed upon his former employee.

"If you've won anything—"

"If I did, then what? What percentage do I draw on winnings?"

In his turn Bill Carson appeared plunged into the profundities of thought. Like an oracle he presently stated the case as he saw it:

"On winnings where I've staked a man I generally make a fifty-fifty split with him, same as a grub-stake. But there are times like this when I'd say that anything on on top of my three hundred you get ten per cent; that's allowing you to keep the two hundred that went for faro. Fork over, Mr. Minor."

Mr. Minor forked over. Which is to say he dragged up out of

his pockets a truly noble wad of bills and dumped it on the bar.

Bill Carson estimated. "You didn't do bad for a beginner, Buck," he said. "You might grow up to be a real man some day, if only you had the tailor sew some buttons on that blab mouth of yours so you could lock it up once in a while—and same time could keep from pouring all the liquor in town down your gullet. How come this little stack of blue chips?"

"That dirty game of roulette," said Buck. "Number four lost the first hundred like I knowed she would. She won the next two times like I knowed she wouldn't."

"And faro?"

"It was my off night at faro," said Buck.

Bill Carson began peeling off bills. "You lost your two hundred; that's good. You won seven thousand for me. You get ten percent. Here's your seven hundred."

"And you say I'm fired, Bill?"

"You're damn right I said it, and meant it."

Buck sighed. Then he said briskly, "Well, you'll be wanting another man, won't you? There'll be a job open like mine, won't there?"

"What about it?"

"Me, I'm footloose and ain't got any sort of job," said Buck. "I'm applying right now for the one with you!"

"Well," conceded Bill Carson, "it might save me time and trouble looking around. It's a go, Buck. You're hired. Have a last drink?"

"Don't mind if I do. Like you said, this cussing them bums sort of makes a man's throat go dry."

"Just the same, I'm remembering that wallop you gave me just now and doggoned near put me down and out; you've got that coming back to you, Buck!"

"Want to try it right now, Bill? Here's a good place with lots of room."

"I want it out in the open somewhere, Buck, with a shovel handy, so I can give you a nice, speedy burial."

"Say, Bill! I just thought about something!"

"Don't believe it. It's not within you."

"About that seven thousand! Like you said yourself, now I'm on your payroll we ought to split it fifty-fifty!"

"It might be a good idea some time," said Bill Carson mildly,

"for us to go up on the mountainside over at my place and put the whole wad under a rock. Then we'd see which one of us could get it, the whole works!"

"Me, I'd like that fine!"

"Only be sure to bring that shovel along, Buck." and the two went out, elbow to elbow, without a present care in a great big, beautiful world. Only when they had walked a dozen steps along the rickety sidewalk Buck said sharply, "Hi, Bill! We better step lively and swing around a corner; by now, likely, Brew Hammond is on his feet again, so I can almost feel bullet holes in my back!" So they stepped along and swung around the first corner.

"I followed you into town," said Bill Carson when they were in their saddles and on their way, "because I wanted to check up on my mail and I forgot to tell you to look it up for me. Seems as though," he added drily, "you know pretty near everything about me and my business, so I wouldn't be surprised if I had to fire you again real soon if you go off ad get a snootful and start in like a man on top of a soap box. I was hoping there might even yet be some good word about Harry Morton. And there wasn't. Hammond killed him, Buck. And I even had the hunch to have a talk with Hammond today." He shrugged. "He's in no condition right now to talk, anyhow."

"Which way from here, kid?"

"El Capitan."

Buck Minor lifted his heavy shoulders heavily.

"They'll throw you out," he said.

"That's what I think," said Bill Carson. "So I'd sort of like to find out. See the horse I'm riding?"

Bright Angel, of course. He didn't want any other horse under him. There were reasons, at least two valid reasons.

"Sure," said Buck. "The Black Devil. What about him? I wouldn't trade this plug of mine for ten of him."

So they rode, and made short time of it.

At El Capitan Ranch headquarters they pulled up; it was late afternoon. Bill Carson swung down from the saddle. His new hired hand shook his head.

"Not me, Bill. I'm not looking for another skinning. I'm drifting along home. See you later maybe."

Tess Edwards, alone and lonely, was riding the high places. She

rode along the crest of the lofty ridge, the hog's-back they called it, that separated El Capitan Ranch from the Silver River Ranch. "Both mine!" she said fervently within herself, and had to add, almost despondently, "If I can hold on to them! Brew Hammond, the devil, has caught me in his trap. He steals my cattle and I know it; he steals my water, but what can I do about it? It's all his water, Silver Lake water, anyhow. But—" And she reached out both open arms as though she would draw all the loveliness of this wild country close to her breast, 'Oh, how I love it all! How it's going to break my heart—"

She could see the still, placid expanse of the beautiful lake—her lake, because Hammond had sold it to her—hers if she could hold it! From the top of the ridge, looking down on it, it was a lovely mirror, reflecting the tall mountains wearing their firs and pines as a lady wears her furs. And when she looked the other way, down upon the upper end of El Capitan, the lower end of White Rock Ranch which that impossible rascal Bill Carson, that snake in the grass, had grabbed, she saw a dearth of water. Yet she smiled humorously. Pedro Morales, bless him, had knocked the daylights out of Brew Hammond. His alter ego, Bill Gaunt, had been fun. And the real man, Bill Carson?

She dwelt upon them all, the three men who were but one. She said, "Tess, old girl, the joke was on you and you weren't man enough to take it. Or maybe you are? Now, I wonder!"

Pedro Morales, darn him, had started her wrong. To begin with, he had made her mad. Then somehow, the lounging lizard, he had aroused her interest, and when she had watched him with the wild, man-killing horses, he had stirred a grudging sort of admiration. There wasn't another man on the ranch who could have ridden Bright Angel. And when he had made fun of her—Well, anyhow he had had his fun! And just that, it dawned on her, was all that he was out for! Fun! Why, the world ought to be full of it! But was it?

She kept thinking, and the core of her thoughts was this darned Bill Carson. All the way from the Pedro Morales beginning she had sensed within the man something not to be detected in the outward shell of a border halfbreed, mostly Indian. That night in Las Nueces, watching him gamble, he was a cool hand. Dressed in his theatric Mexican finery, playing a part as she did not then know, he was a handsome, romantic looking devil. She recalled

his glances across the table; he was laughing at her then, but she did not know, having no clue. Then—

She recalled the look he had given her when they two were alone, out on the wooden sidewalk in front of the Ace High. And other thoughts swarmed all about her; buzzing in her memories: How he had fought Buck Minor—she had heard the whole story, Buck Minor's side of it included— Then she thought of Bill Gaunt Oh, how she had slapped him so that her palm tingled! Bill Gaunt, lean with a hard face which had the trick of softening swiftly with his smile; she hadn't been able to escape feeling his magnetism, his sheer manhood. A man who had twice made fun of her! Bill Carson now, a man who had three times made fun of Tess Edwards who would rather make fun of other people!

She thought of him, she thought of Brew Hammond, of other men she knew.

"Darn this Bill Carson man!" she said.

She looked again at Silver Lake. How placid it was, she thought; why can't a girl's heart and soul always be like that and not—

And all of a sudden Silver Lake seemed to go right straight up into the air! It seemed to blow up, to explode! There were geysers of water. The sun flashed through the spray and she thought of the last fireworks she had seen.

And she wondered, "What on earth!" Placidity of a lake—placidity of a girl's heart and soul! Then, without warning, the explosion!

She thought, "I'm being dizzy inside. There's been a landslide, and I'm—I'm making a mountain out of a mole-hill. Tess, you've been dizzy ever since you started thinking of Bill Carson. Let's get together and stop it."

The eruption in the lake, if that was what it was, ceased. She was glad. It was time to go home anyway. She looked wistfully down into her own valley, dear old Capitan, and she thought of it as of a man dying of thirst to whom she could not give a cup of water. And then—

And then she saw—

But before she saw, she heard the deep rumbling; it was like an angry growling deep down in the bowels of the earth. She did not know that Baldy "Ugly" Ule had lighted a mile long fuse, and then had run like a scared cat, ducking through crooked, water-

worn tunnels, crawling at times, up and running again. She felt the earth rock under her. And then she saw!

To her it was a miracle. Looking down from the ridge into the ravine where El Capitan Ranch and White Rock Ranch bordered, she saw a tremendous gush of water pouring out of the mountainside, a turbulent, wildly-mad river rolling rocks in its path, uprooting trees, sweeping down into White Rock to begin with, then rushing on to pour its headlong current that was life-blood to her ranch, down into the uplands of El Capitan! She cried out a gleeful *"Whee!"* and headed straight home. To tell Ted Edwards, to tell the world that water had come back to the dying El Capitan Ranch.

Bill Carson and Ted Edwards were sitting on the porch. Bill Carson had just said, "We know how it goes, Ted. You had your money, barrels of it, and you lost it. Right now I've got more money than I can count. It cost me a damn fine ranch down in Texas, dammit, but anyhow I've got it. We're both up against Hammond. I'm chipping in with you before I lose what I've got, and maybe that won't be long now. We're going to see that that girl of yours gets a clean title on Capitan and on Silver Lake, too. Shucks, all I wanted Silver Lake for was its water, and—"

And then Tess burst in upon them, and again she said, this time by way of greeting, "Whee!"

"Sounds good," said Ted Edwards. And then added, "Mr. Bill Carson, Tess. An old friend of mine that I'd like—"

"I have heard of Mr. Carson," said Tess. "Lila told me."

"Now, look here, Tess," her father began.

"Didn't you hear what I said?" demanded Tess. "I said, 'Whee!' And I meant it. Why don't you ask me?"

"I know," said Bill Carson. "I bet a man a dollar I know."

"What, Smarty?" said Tess.

"Water," said Bill Carson.

Tess could have slapped him again. How did he know so darned much!

"Tell me," she said, and dropped to the bench, dragging off her riding gauntlets.

"I've already told your old man here. There's a sort of snaggly cave running clean through the mountain—"

"So I've heard," said Tess.

"And 'Ugly' Ule was to go packing as far through the thing as he could, then set off about a million pounds of dynamite and run like a rabbit. With luck, Silver Lake would open up again and give us a drink, and— My God!" said Bill Carson, and came up to his feet.

Tess, too, jumped up.

"What is it, Bill?"

"Harry Morton's hat. I've got to know if Harry Morton followed it! So long, Ted. I'm going to see you soon, Tess!"

"I'm coming with you!" said Tess.

As they rode Tess said, "Bill, I've got to tell you something. Two things. First, I hate you and always will. Second, our little Lila is a cat."

Bill Carson chuckled. "What kind of a cat, Tess darling. Wild cat or tabby?"

"They're all the same breed. There's a man on my ranch here, Bide Kincaid. He's a skunk, and I've found it out." Tess was always one for menageries. "He was planted here by Brew Hammond, and Tess was the sucker and swallowed everything. Lila has been running to Kincaid with all the inside news, anything she could dig out of Dad or me, to be spilled to Brew Hammond. Lila found out who you were and that you were soiled with filthy lucre, and so went out to get you, as you know full well."

"Tess!"

Tess sniffed. "Don't play innocent with me, Pedro Morales. Anyhow, you were with her as with everyone else, a man of ice. So she rushed back to Brew—"

"Did you say 'Ice,' Tess?"

Tess giggled. "Do you think I am trying to vamp you?"

"You'd better. I've waited long enough!"

Tess's laugh was lovely. Well, he'd known that from the first. So was Tess lovely, another well established fact.

At the camp just across the boundary line, a line which was about to dissolve into nothingness, Buck Minor met them.

"Hello, Buck," said a bright-eyed, flushed Tess.

Buck Minor dragged off his hat. He said, "So you remember me, Miss Tess? That's good."

"Why, Buck, I only fired you because you made me mad. I wish you'd pull your ugly horns in and come back and be my foreman."

"Might," said Buck. "Next time Bill fires me I will. And now what do you think about our water?"

"There's lots of it." Tess began, and then she saw the queer look on Buck's face. He wasn't looking at her, wasn't even listening to her. His look was for Bill Carson.

"All right, Buck," said Bill. "Let's have it."

"I ain't dead sure," said Buck, "but I'd bet on it. I think there's a friend of yours up here. Only he's awful dead."

Bill Carson swung down from the saddle.

"You stay here, Tess." he said.

"I won't," said Tess. "I want to—"

She had one glimpse, then turned and ran away. Buck Minor and Bill Carson stood looking down upon that which the torrent, sweeping down through the underground tunnels and caves had thrown against the bank of the creek. Harry Morton had been shot four times; twice through the head, twice through the upper chest. There were heavy log chains about his body; he must have been tumbled into the lake, then brought here on the torrent "Ugly" Ule had set running.

Bill Carson, with his jaws locked hard, went through the dead man's pockets. Somehow, miraculously, there might have been a scrap of paper, something to tie the crime to the right man, something to give a clue; a paper saved against the water by an oilskin tobacco pouch, something like that. There was nothing of the sort. All that there was was a dead Harry Morton with at least four bullet holes in him, coming down from Silver Lake.

"It's all I need to know anyhow," said Bill Carson.

"I'll go get a pick and shovel," said Buck.

"Sure. Then I'd like to drop over to see Brew Hammond."

"Sure."

CHAPTER XIX

AFTER a while Bill Carson went down the trail to where he had left his horse, Bright Angel. Tess was waiting there.

"I've got a job of work to do, Tess," he said. "You ride on home and later on I am going to come to see you."

"Where are you going, Bill?" she asked, though she knew.

"I want a talk with Hammond."

She understood. She didn't want him to go, she didn't want something horrible to happen. She didn't know what to say. Involuntarily her hand went out to rest on his arm.

"Oh, Bill! Does it have to be?"

He said very simply, "Tess, I love you from the boot heels up, and you know it. I've loved you from the first day; you know that, too. I'm going to come back and go to work on my life's job: that's teaching you how to love me. And now it's so-long for a while—"

"Bill!"

He kissed her. His lips, crushed against hers, felt her mouth trembling and warm and responsive.

"Bill," she sobbed, "I'm going with you! I'm going with you everywhere, every time—"

"Not this time, Tess," he said.

"But—but if you didn't ever come back! I'll die, Bill! Don't go! Don't go to see Brew Hammond tonight! Let's ride into town; let's send the sheriff out for him—"

He caught her closer to him, he stopped her words with a second kiss, then he said gently, holding her back from him,

"Do what I tell you. Go home. Wait for me. I'll be back."

She went up into her saddle then. She even smiled.

"Good luck, Bill," she said lightly, almost laughingly. "I'll be waiting for you. Waiting always, Pedro Morales, you devil!"

She sped away, never looking back. Then there was Buck Minor coming down the trail.

"Keep your shirt on, Bill," he said. "I'm on your payroll again, and I'm coming along."

"Thanks, Buck. Not this time. I sort of hanker to ride alone."

"Sure," said an understanding Buck Minor. "Ride lucky, kid." But just the same, the minute Bill Carson rode off on his errand and was out of sight.

Buck Minor ran for his own horse, saddled in a hurry, and discreetly followed.

Bill Carson leaned forward and patted Bright Angel's shoulder. "Good boy," he said. "Let's get there!"

It was dusk, almost dark, when he reined in, in front of Brew

Hammond's ranch house. He slid out of the saddle, dropped Bright Angel's reins and stepped on to the front door. On the porch, hard to make out in the shadows, he glimpsed someone moving.

That small, slight figure on the porch turned out to be Lila Edwards.

There was light enough for her to make out that it was Bill Carson, enough light even, perhaps, for her to read what was so plainly written on his face.

"Oh, Mr. Gaunt!" she exclaimed, and put her hand to her throat.

"Never mind that," said Bill Carson. "Where's Hammond?"

"Mr. Hammond?" she stammered, still clutching her throat. "Why—why, I don't know! He isn't here. I came to see him about— Well, he wasn't here, and—"

He brushed by her and went into the house. The front door gave entrance to a big room where for some years Brewster Hammond had made himself comfortable.

There were big leather chairs, a couple of couches made gay with bright red and black Indian blankets, a table or two with coal-oil lamps on them.

Lila, poor butterfly, Lila, came running in then and caught his arm.

"Oh, Mr. Carson—"

He shook her off. He saw Brewster Hammond, slouched down in a big chair in a shadowy corner. He saw Hammond surge up to his feet.

"Hammond," said Bill Carson, "I came up with an old friend of mine just now. His name was Harry Morton. He's dead. You killed him for a dirty ten thousand dollars. Steve Quinton, from down Albuquerque way, knew about it. So you killed Steve Quinton that night down at Las Nueces. You tried to kill me, but your aim wasn't good. Let's see how good it is now! I'm here to talk it over with you. This time, Hammond, let's talk it out in the smoke! Ready?"

Lila screamed. Again she threw her slender, agile body against Bill Carson.

She tried with all her vigorous might to clutch his right arm, his gun arm—

Hammond knew what was coming, coming to him or to Bill

Carson. He jerked out his gun and fired. His shot came a split second before Bill Carson's.

Hammond's shot went wild—yet not wild enough. His bullet, missing its target by inches, tore into a tenderer flesh. Lila's hands went in a sort of spasm to her full breast—she tottered like a mechanical doll with its spring running down, and half turned and fell.

"You dirty dog," roared Bill Carson, and squeezed the trigger.

Hammond, with his second bullet on the way, dropped his gun, stood a moment like a man trying to balance himself on a tight rope, and dropped. But he caught his gun up again and scrambled to his feet—

A gun blazed from the doorway behind Bill Carson.

Buck Minor had just dropped in to take a hand.

"Here's one from me," said Buck Minor. "Mr. Hammond, you're a louse."

If a louse, Hammond was a dead one.

"I'm afraid Mrs. Edwards is pretty bad hurt, Buck," said Bill Carson.

He shoved his gun back into its leather. The smell of burnt powder was heavy on the still air. He said,

"Hammond wasn't a very good shot. He didn't mean to hit her."

And then there was, all of a sudden, all unexpectedly. Tess Edwards. They might have known that Tess would be nowhere but here at a time like this.

She went down on her knees beside Lila.

"Lila!" she said. "Oh, Lila! Are you— *Oh, Lila!*"

Lila had lost everything in life that she wanted; now Lila was losing life itself.

"Tess?—Is that you, Tess? I— Oh, Tess, he shot me! Brew shot me when I was trying to help him and— Oh, I'm afraid! Is this my blood running out, Tess? *Tell me!* Tell me the truth! Tell me that I am not going to— Oh, Tess—"

Tess hugged her close.

"Lila! Lila—you'll be all right! Poor little Lila—just lie still—"

And Lila, for perhaps the first time in her silly, futile life, lay still. Very still.

Bill Carson carried Tess out of the house in his arms, carried

her with her tears against his face and her arms tight about his neck, to a little pine-timbered knoll overlooking the glint of Silver River.

The stars were out; the world was hushed; out here there was no smell of burnt powder.

"Tess—" he said.

"Don't talk to me, Bill. Not now. Just hold me. Tight, Bill; I feel as though the whole world—"

He cradled her in his arms. He didn't say anything. Her eyes were shut, the tears squeezing through. But after a while the tears stopped and her eyes opened. Before she saw the stars or the sheen of laughing Silver River she saw Bill Carson's eyes looking down into hers.

"Oh, Bill! I wish now—"

"I know, Tess. We all wish."

"Let's make our wish together!"

They didn't even have to put it into words.

THE END

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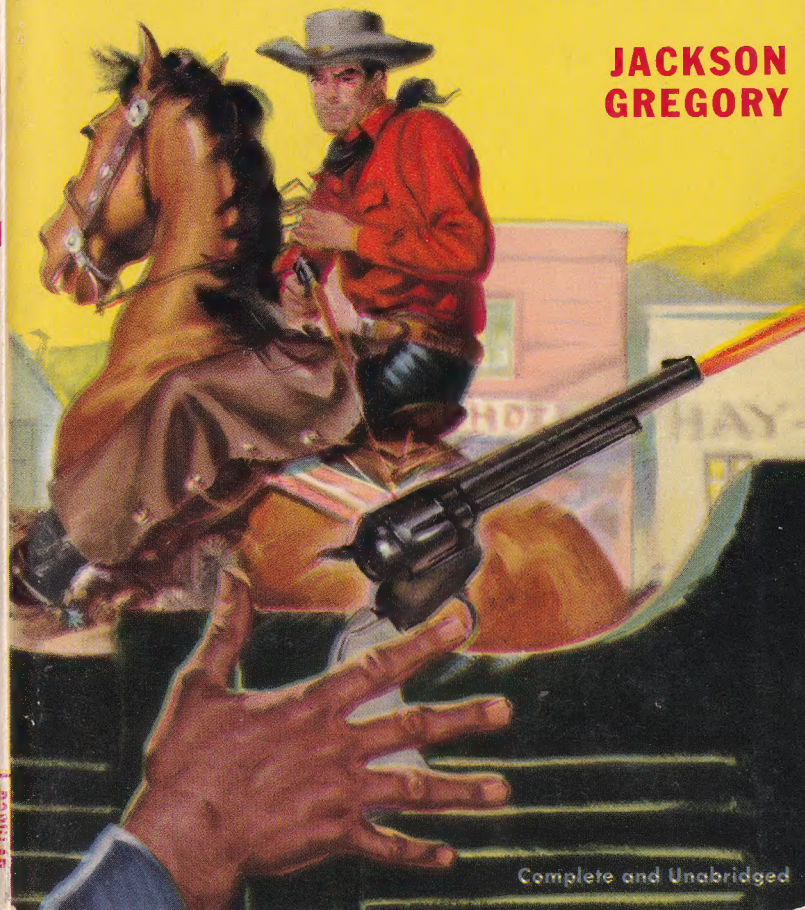

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